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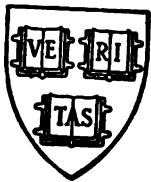
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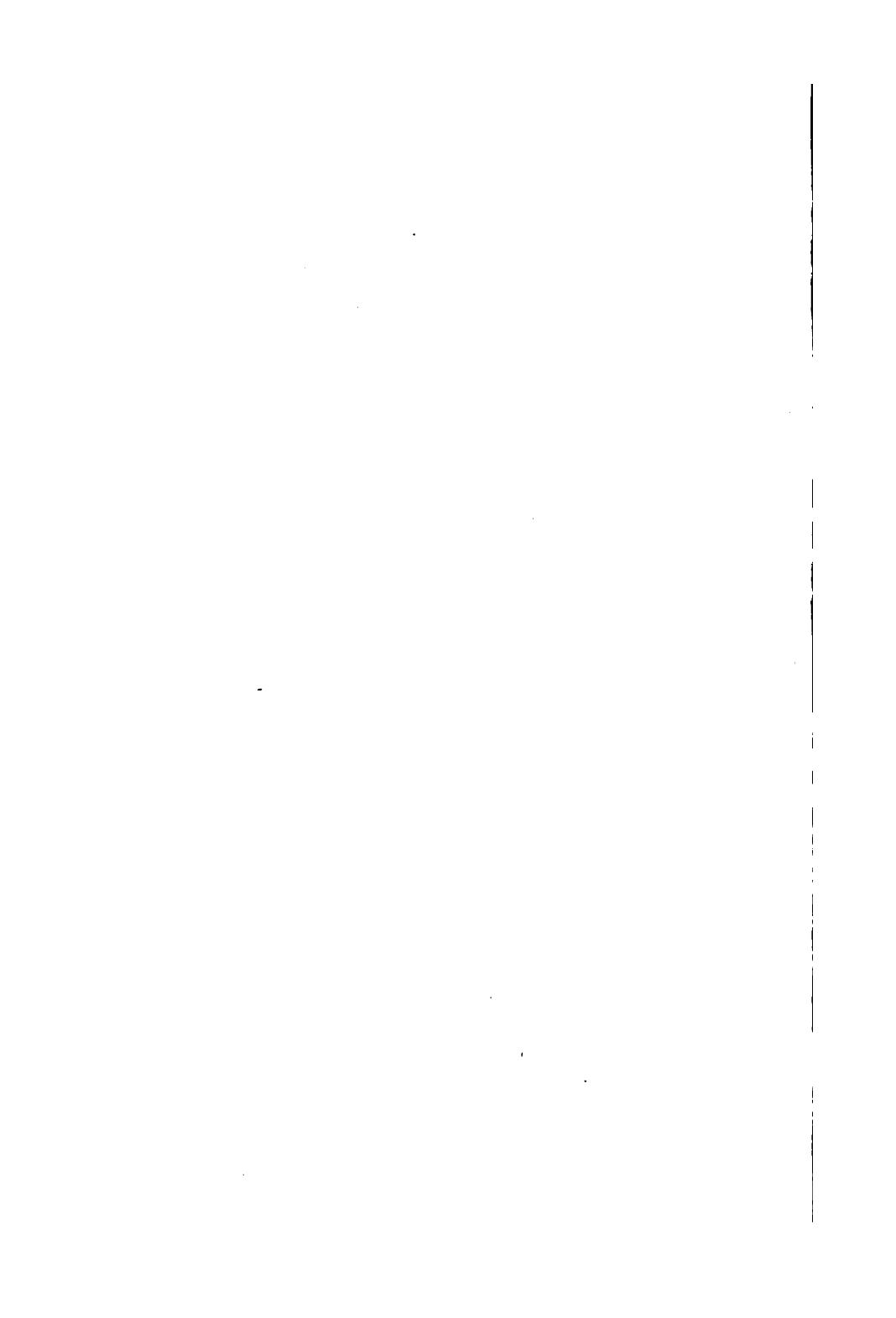
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"I saw her draw back"

*See page 38*

# The Privateers

By

J. B. MARRIOTT WATSON

*Author of "Hurricane Island,"  
"Captain Fortune," etc.*



NEW YORK  
D. Appleton & Company  
1877



"I saw her draw back"

see page 23

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*Author of "Hurricane Island,"  
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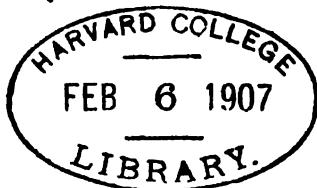


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1907

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## **DRAMATIS PERSONÆ**

**LIEUTENANT KERSLAKE, R.N.**, the narrator.

**HERBERT FORDYCE ALSTON**, an American operator, who is engaged to Sylvia Lovell.

**WILSON RUDGWICK**, an American operator, interested in railways and other things.

**NATHANIEL BUTTERFIELD**, his factotum.

**JUDE BACON**, the captain of Rudgwick's yacht.

**SYLVIA LOVELL**, a beautiful English girl, who unwittingly becomes the shuttlecock between  
battledores.

**MRS. LOVELL**, her mother.



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## **THE PRIVATEERS**



# THE PRIVATEERS

## CHAPTER I

### THE AMERICAN ON THE LINKS

THE first time I saw Miss Lovell was about six of a fine evening in early summer. I had crossed from Portsmouth to Ryde, and taken the ridiculous toy train of the Island railway as far as Bembridge in order to enjoy a game of golf on the links. I had done the same thing a dozen times during my gunnery course, though I usually went over to Hayling Island to indulge my taste for golf. But the links at St. Helen's are prettily situated, not too difficult for a beginner, and the sun that June day was fiery. I think those were the inducements that took me over. Portsmouth was hot and stuffy, but a breeze blew out in the Solent, and upon the eastern coast of the Island the flags were crackling in the wind that came up that open channel with a freshness unfelt on the southern shores of the mainland.

It was the wind that drew my eyes to Miss Lovell. I finished my round early, and, refusing

to join a foursome, was ferried into Bembridge across the mouth of Brading harbour. The harbour was lively with the picturesque little boats of the yacht club, and some bigger shipping loomed against the summer green of the rising ground behind. Out of Bembridge I took a route that led me over the hills and towards the open downs. This corner of the Island stands sentinel in the Channel, with, as it were, one eye upon France, and the other eastwards towards the narrowing straits of Dover. Between Bembridge and Sandown on the south the chalk bulges towards the sea, rolling in the characteristic manner of chalk, in rounded masses inland, and presenting a scarped and formidable white face to the charging water. It was on these gently swelling downs that I met Miss Lovell.

The wind by this time had risen to a petty gale, and came over the brow of the cliffs from the sea with considerable force. The blue sea was aglitter with foam-heads, and in the dim haze of the horizon one seemed to discern, or imagine, the mass of the adjacent continent. Sea-birds cried and flew 'twixt the cliff and the water, and a small steamer ploughed heavily across the middle distance, rounding the Island from Shanklin or Ventnor. I made these observations with a mind pleasantly and idly occupied, and then I turned and saw Miss Lovell.

She was at the edge of the cliff, a hundred yards away, and I do not think she was aware of my presence. She gave me at that distance but the impression of a white figure, with blown skirts, for the wind was romping with her. Yet even so I was attracted by the picture she made, instinct apparently with youth and freshness, and facing that deep void beneath her with the magnificent unconsciousness of health. And so in my course I moved slowly in her direction, with some curiosity to see her closer, that innocent curiosity which is bred in a holiday mood and in a place of strangers. It was when I was already within a dozen paces of her that she withdrew her gaze from the sea, and turned to go. Then I had a clear sight of her. She was above the mean height of women, as young as the spring, frank and bright of eye, and full of warm blood. To that her complexion spoke, for her face was delicately flushed and happy. She almost smiled at me, as our looks met, and I was conscious that it would have been the smile of mere animal content; or rather, I should say the ebullition of an innocent child abandoned to its mood. As it was, the habit of restraint which in that exhilaration she had thrown aside returned in time; and she passed me with a very proper face, demure and conscious; but the wanton wind still played tricks with her skirt.

As she walked away from the edge it blew up the fichu of her muslin frock, and cast it as a net about her face. She put her head on one side, instinctively to regain her freedom, and tried to withdraw the web of lace with one hand. But the gust was still flying, and pressed the wrap harder upon her. I suppose it blinded her. At any rate she turned round, with her face away from me to disentangle herself, stepping carelessly backward as she did so. Her reckless youth was responsible for the act, and I do not imagine it would have had any serious consequences. She trod on a stone, stumbled and would have gone over if I had not caught her by the arm. In point of fact she was staggering to recover her balance for some few seconds ere I reached her. But I certainly think she would have fallen and she was of the same opinion.

"Thank you so much," she said breathlessly, as she succeeded in ridding herself of her gag. "It was stupid of me."

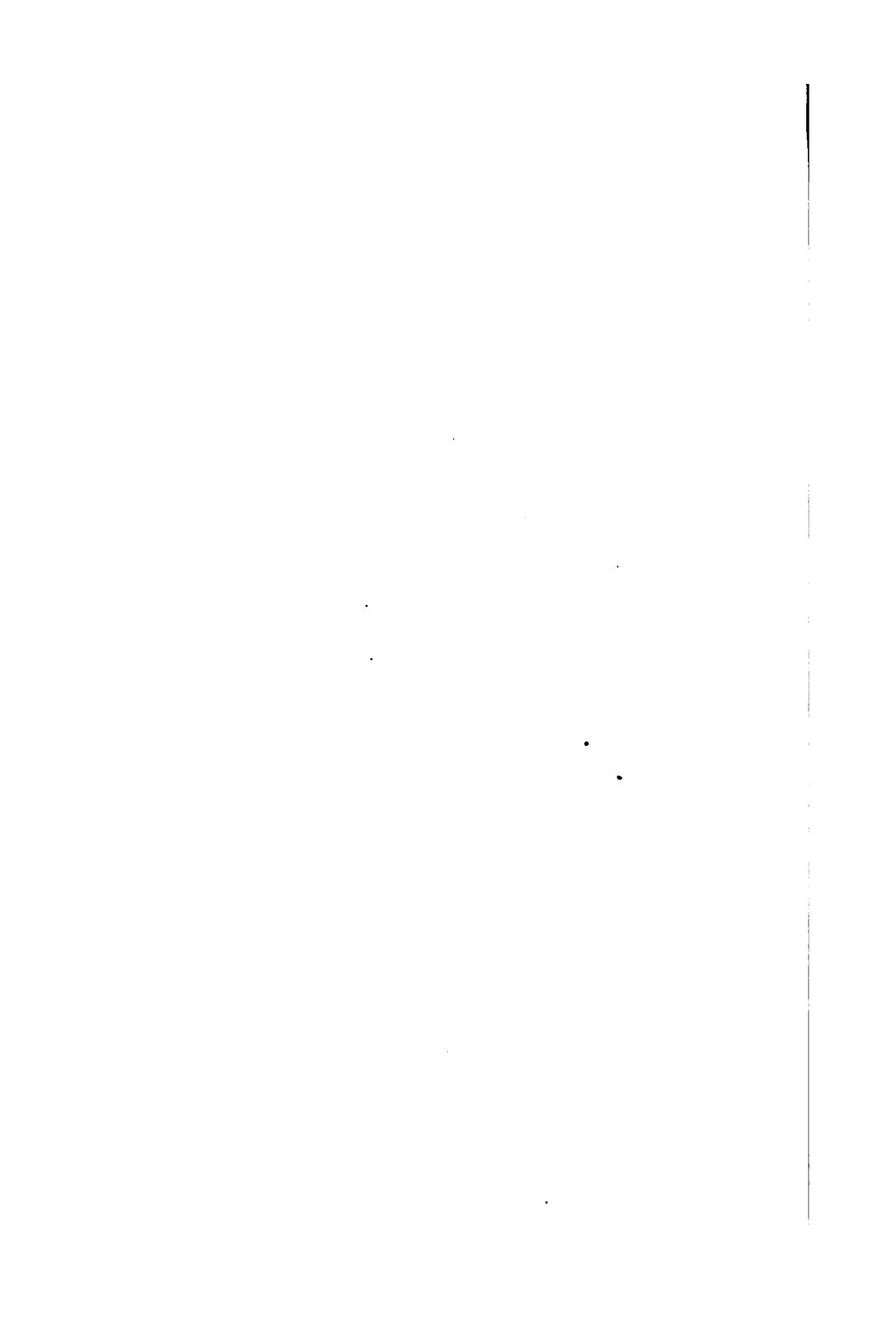
"It was the wind," said I civilly.

She had by this quite recovered, and we were face to face. Hers was oval, soft-skinned, and now wore a deeper flush. Her beauty matched her figure and her courage.

"I was enjoying the air," she explained confusedly. There was really no reason why she should explain to me, and besides it was obvious



**"She trod on a stone, stumbled, and would have gone over  
if I had not caught her by the arm"**



## THE PRIVATEERS

7

that she had been so occupied. But my remark was equally unnecessary.

"It's beautiful, isn't it?"

I think we went three or four steps together before it dawned on her that it was unusual to be walking with a stranger, even if he had saved her from a fall.

"Thank you very much," she said in her pretty voice. "Good evening."

I returned her good-evening, and resumed my walk. I watched her go over the rises, until I lost her in the hollows, and then I turned and made my way back to Bembridge. In my thoughts I put her down as a very pretty girl of twenty with the promise of greater beauty in greater maturity. Her face, her voice, and her manner alike had attracted me. But she had gone over the hills, Heaven knew whither, while I had finished my gunnery course, and should be gone in a week even from Portsmouth.

There did not, however, seem any adequate reason why I should be gone from Bembridge that night. As a matter of fact at dinner in the hotel I made an arrangement to play on the following morning. I am no hand at golf to this day, but it has a fascination for me, and if I can find a man who is not too greatly my superior I am willing to fight him. My opponent of the morrow was not much better than I,

and I had determined to beat him, if I could; I am supposed to be an obstinate man in the service.

In the smoking-room were several members of the club and other visitors to the Island, and here the talk circled airily, as is the habit, about the game. Cricketers may well bore those uninterested in the sport by their excessive devotion to it, and base-ballers may easily fire the uninitiated with their technicalities; but I know no one so wearisome with his "shop" as the golfer. I was listening with one ear to the desultory comments while I lent two eyes to an illustrated magazine, when among the exchanges of conversation I heard a new note and a new voice. I do not know what made me look up. Certainly it was with no conscious curiosity that I did so. Perhaps it was that I merely recognised the voice as American, and thus a little more individual among the several voices of the room. At any rate I did glance across to the group, and thus Herbert Fordyce Alston passed at once into my sight and life.

He was tall and somewhat elegantly built but his head seemed slightly to overbalance his body. Perhaps this impression was due to the heavy moustache he wore, which swept in two great arcs across his cheeks and protruded thus upon the surrounding vacancy of air. But the breadth

of his brow and the mass of his sleek hair, worn rather long, and parted in the middle, probably helped to give emphasis to his head. He held a cigar in one hand which was jewelled on three fingers, and it wagged to give point to his agreement. As his voice ceased he looked round with the air of having silenced his opponent, and his eye caught mine. He smiled engagingly. There was just so much attraction in his silent salute that I almost rose and joined the discussion. But I didn't. In fact I was tired with my exercise and the full-flowing air of the downs, and shortly afterwards I went to bed. As I thrust open my window the noise of a panting engine ascended to me from the yard below; and I looked out, and descried in the faint light a motor-cycle puffing slowly away into the night.

It is in these facts that my first association with Herbert Fordyce Alston lies. I thought no more of him either then or next day, until I met him on the links, when he once more gave me the impression of unusual individuality. He watched me make a rather good stroke, leaning on his own brassy, and when I came up to him nodded with more ceremony than an Englishman.

"That was a right good hit," he said with his pleasant but unmistakeable American voice.

I acknowledged his compliment civilly, and we went round the course more or less in proximity

with occasional encounters and an occasional exchange of remarks.

It was at lunch that we grew friendly. He had a good deal to say of the Island, and of England in general, and was interesting with the manner of his criticism as well as in the matter. His style had piquancy above all, though his comment was goodnatured. He was not a stranger to Europe, but, as he phrased it, got few chances of really assimilating it. He was from the Middle West, as I gathered, and pursued a career which he did not specify. I remember thinking this omission odd in one who was otherwise so frank, and even voluble. He had been at Yale, and he knew several languages; in fine he met me on my own level as an educated man of the world. One got the idea of a certain largeness of confidence about him, which was rather fascinating; and that with his keen cheerful eyes, and his handsome well-coloured face composed an altogether attractive personality. He had no great proficiency at golf which did not seem to distress him. Indeed he told me that he was playing to while time away.

"I'm here, Lieutenant Kerslake, on a more important mission," said he with twinkling eyes. "It might be fixed up as business, only it's more important than business. There's degrees of comparison, I reckon, Lieutenant, in affairs. There's play, you know,—that's positive; there's

business—that comparative; and there's marriage. That's the top-note."

I murmured congratulations such as a stumbling Englishman may offer to a stranger who has unexpectedly thrust a confidence upon him.

"Well, you see," he said lighting his cigar, and speaking in that even unexcited voice he employed throughout. "A good many of you go over and extract our beauties; and it's time we evened the balance."

"The lady is English?" I asked with a show of interest.

He threw aside the match he had blown out. "English to the bone," he pronounced, "and I don't know after all that there's very much difference between us. If she'd been born or lived in the United States she'd have been an American, and as it is she's English. That's about all it amounts to. Which only goes to demonstrate that birth is an accident, and that there's no monopoly of beauty in either country."

"American women have a great charm," said I politely.

"I know one English woman who can beat 'em on their own ground," said he, smiling.

He was in love, I reflected, but I hoped it was true for the sake of my countrywomen.

We played together in the afternoon, and I gave him a hollow beating which he accepted with

infinite good nature, drawing shrewd deductions from the game as we walked to the ferry.

"I could better that stroke with a week's practice," he decided. "If I stay here any time I'll fix it up."

"Are you staying long?" I asked without great curiosity.

"Well, that depends," he returned. "It depends on a lady."

"Oh!" I apologised by my intonation for my unintentional trespass on his privacy, but he continued as if unconscious of this.

"If I can persuade the lady to marry me right away, I shan't be kicking my heels about here very long. But if she proves obdurate—" He smiled at me, and did not finish his sentence. "You see there's a good deal women have to arrange on these occasions. I know our women over yonder couldn't start on a voyage without full rigging, while you and I might be willing to sail with a jury mast."

His manner implied no comment; he was merely stating a fact; and he sat in the boat meditatively contemplating the thwarts, as the ferryman pulled his oars. I had no doubt that he was pursuing the chain of thought which our conversation had started, and I supposed it was pleasant. My attention left him, and wandered to the offing where a schooner was tacking for the

harbour. It had the smart appearance of a yacht, not over-large, was trim of rig, and black of hull, and flew neither flag nor pennon, which was unusual in a boat arriving at harbour. As I watched her idly, I was conscious that Alston had lifted his eyes, and was, like me, gazing at her. His face had undergone some change which I could not at first determine. His colour remained, but his eyes were now narrowed slits, and his lower jaw protruded so as to give him almost a prognathous appearance. You could see the ridge of the bone and the muscles outlined in the flesh. He looked back at me suddenly.

"Lieutenant, do you mind if this man puts back? I've just recalled that I'm due at St. Helen's. I hope it won't disturb your plans any."

I assured him it was not of the slightest consequence to me, and, the necessary instructions having been given, the boat was put round. Alston resumed his chatter which had been interrupted by his reverie, and saluted me as he stepped out on the point.

"I'm much obliged, Mr. Kerslake," said he and smiled and nodded. He took a few steps away and the ferryman turned the boat again. The schooner had come to anchor, not more than two hundred yards away, and a small boat was putting off from her. Alston's face had somehow arrested my interest. It had changed from the

moment he had sighted the yacht. I wondered why. And his sudden remembrance of a duty at St. Helen's was too obviously an expedient. There had been during that unconscious moment of self-revelation, when he was off guard, so to speak, an expression of concern upon his face, and if I had read aright, of resolution. He interested me. I sat in the boat wondering; and as I wondered I looked back. Alston's tall figure was discernible on the top of a dune, and he was watching the progress of the small boat towards Bembridge.

## CHAPTER II

SYLVIA LOVELL

As I landed from the ferry the schooner's boat drew up to the point, and I cast a glance at it. In the stern, with the ~~rudder~~ in his hand sat a short square-faced man of forty or thereabouts, clean-shaven, and sallow of complexion. He scrutinised me keenly as he discarded his ~~rudder~~ and stood up, buttoning his sailor's reefer with one hand on his broad chest.

"Lay her along," said he to the men, and that injunction demonstrated his nationality by the intonation. I had left one American on the sands of St. Helen's; and I stepped ashore to encounter another on Bembridge point. The two men, side by side, would have contrasted physically as strongly as in their apparent natures. This newcomer from the sea, was abrupt and quick in manner; he had no sense of spaciousness either in manners or in mind, I could have sworn. But he knew his own mind like the other; both acted with a display of decision which is unusual with us, and leaves perhaps the impression of a stronger determination on the spectator. I con-

trusted them in my mind idly because one had avoided the other; and that other now walked briskly up to the hotel behind me.

As I saw him presently in conversation with the manager he rather suggested to me a prizefighter, and it was clear that he had as little ceremony as one.

"I suppose you've got a directory, anyway, knocking about this football," said he with an intonation that almost imparted contempt, as he turned away from the manager.

Face to face we stared at each other, but myself, I trust with less frankness and overtness. He decided in that stare that he had no use for me, and as he shouldered his way past he had, I imagine, dismissed me from his mind as immaterial to his quest and history. For all his masterfulness he was no prophet.

I have said immaterial to his quest, for it was evident that he had been making inquiries of the manager and had been disappointed. I wondered vaguely if he had been asking for Herbert Fordyce Alston, and if so, why. In the coffee-room he turned over several books of reference, including time-tables and local guides, and abandoned them all with an audible exclamation of impatience. He sat at the window looking out for a moment, and whistled as he pondered. I became immersed in a paper, and when I looked up again

he was gone. He had the restlessness of his race and I the placidity perhaps of mine.

In further evidence of my placidity I spent half an hour watching the yacht enter the basin from which act I deduced like a good detective—that, directories or no directories, the owner designed to stay for some little while. She was handled with skill, but to my sailor's mind there was some slackness about the crew, who were directed by a red-faced man, with an upturned nose, and a big voice. One in particular fixed my eye, tall, lean, grey of face and pock-marked, who squirted tobacco juice into the water, and caressed a short irregular beard in the intervals of hauling at a rope. His beard seemed to grow in patches on his chin, and as he chewed he discovered large vacancies in his row of teeth.

But the schooner passed into Brading harbour, and I into the hotel again, where I dined with a fellow-golfer very pleasantly. As I came out into the hall I scanned the letter rack, and found nothing for myself, but a telegram addressed "Alston." It seemed then that he was expected back at the hotel wherever he wandered at the moment. And that I was destined to discover that very evening; for I met him as I strolled on the downs a little later.

He welcomed me in his almost affectionate way,

paid a tribute to the evening air, and asked how one of our companions of the afternoon had fared in his match. But he was not really interested in my reply, as was obvious. He had not put his question, and it came presently.

"Anyone new at the hotel?"

I told him. "Ah!" said he "from the schooner?"

"Yes"; I returned almost with intention "a countryman of yours."

"Plenty of us in Europe about now," he remarked indifferently. At that I recollect ed something, and told him of the telegram in the rack. He bent his brows, but his affable eyes smiled. "Really? It's good of you to tell me," he said, "I must send for it." Then he paused, "In the rack, was it?" He gazed at the great blue water that vanished in indeterminate darkness towards France. "If there's one thing I hate more than another, it's getting cables when I'm on my holiday," he declared slowly. "It spoils sport. But these damned business matters won't wait. We must take the tide, Sir, or get left on the strand. I'll send for that cable."

"I'll have it sent up to you, if you'll give me the address," said I, "I'm going straight back." He paused before he answered. "It's very kind of you, Mr. Kerslake, and I'll accept your offer with thanks. It would take me some trouble to find a

boy and I've got rather a particular engagement on just now."

"Oh, I'll send it," I replied easily, "if you'll tell me where." Herbert Fordyce Alston and I were mortal atoms from distant parts of the world. We had fortuitously encountered, and were destined in all likelihood fortuitously to part. In a week we should hardly remain names to each other. Yet he seemed to hesitate ere he gave me the address, which he finally wrote on an envelope:

Bessenton Manor,  
By Sandown.

And so I left him, with the added conviction that he did not want to meet the owner of the schooner, his countryman.

When I reached the hotel the dusk was in the air, and the hall was darkling. I went up to the rack to get Alston's telegram, and as I put out my hand for it I perceived that the dark shaven American was standing in front of the board. I wondered if he had noticed the superscription of the telegram, or if the darkness had prevented him from doing so. If Alston wanted to avoid him it followed that he wanted to find Alston. Yet if he wanted to know of Alston's presence in the neighbourhood he might have learned it by inquiry of the manager; and I had gathered that

he had retired from those investigations discomfited.

I took the wire, and, seeing my arm come past him, he turned and favoured me with a sharp look. Did he realise then that I might not be so immaterial in his life as he had thought? After the glance he left the hall, and I turned to find the messenger. Yet ere I had reached the office I had a bright idea. It was a lovely June evening, and the fragrance of the sea mingled with the scents of the fields and hedges. It could not be more than a few miles to Bessenton. I would take the letter myself for the sake of the walk.

It was delightful along the upper heights, where the Road from Bembridge ascends and descends among woods and valleys towards the bare and open downs that front the sea. I walked briskly, accompanied by the most casual welter of thoughts, for when one is most entertained one's mind is least coherent. Sounds, scents and sights alone contributed to my mental flow in which there was no logical sequence. The stars emerged in the vault above, and stimulated a vague sense of romance. I was young, I was sound as a bell, and I thought I had a career before me. I was not in love, and the world was my oyster. Romance visits such with exquisite tantalisations, and romance was my attendant on that walk.

I was half way to my destination before I discovered that I had someone else in attendance. At least I was never sure of this until much later but I had a vague suspicion. It is absurd to say that one can have a sense of being pursued. No instinct renders civilised man that service. But sounds, recurrent or even intermittent, may arouse the mind to suspicion. The whole machinery of the senses and the intellect is called into operation in detecting that pursuit, as mine was on this occasion. I stopped, and the noise of my follower (if he was my follower) died away. I resumed my course, and it seemed as if he also presently resumed his. It could not be echo, nor was it likely to be mere coincidence. But as I say I did not come to this conclusion definitely until later, until, in fact, on my return journey. I was, as I went, too deeply engaged by pleasant fancies.

Those fancies endured until I found I had missed my way, and was upon the barren downs. It seemed now somewhat absurd to have started from Bembridge with that unnecessary enthusiasm for the trudge. Far better if I had sent a messenger according to my earlier thought. The place was vacant; its wide and empty spaces challenged one inhospitably. To be sure there were the stars and the cool night-winds, but I could have enjoyed these better if I had been sure

of my destination. And no one was about to advise me. Where the mischief was Bessenton Manor?

I struck down from the hills and deliberately crossed a hedge, for if I could not trust myself confidently to the roads I had a certain faith in being able to reach a farm-house; and here perhaps I got an inkling first of my follower. I caught sight of him mounting the hedge in the starlight, at a distance of fifty yards. There was the loom of his figure for a moment and then it disappeared. Here was my chance to obtain my direction; I went back and called to him. But no answer came out of the night. I called again, and was still received with silence. In some wonder I resumed my way conjecturing that the figure must be that of some trespasser, some hind maybe upon an unlawful mission, who had no occasion for publicity.

My precognition was right, and my faith justified itself with my arrival at some sort of cottage after the passage of two or three fields. Here I had no difficulty in learning my way, and pursuing the road again I came eventually out upon a limb of the downs that overhung Sandown Bay. Lights were twinkling on the distant beach like glow-worms, but here on the uplands all was very still and dark; and Bessenton Manor was formidably dark and unfriendly. It

had a humble approach through a small gate and across a patch of orchard, and it seemed to suggest dilapidation even in the gloom of night. I made my way with some difficulty to the door, and pulled at the bell, which started crazily to jingle in the distance. It jigged on the air and the silence till it almost made me ashamed of my unintentional violence, and then suddenly the door was opened, and the light of a hanging lamp flickered on me from the hall.

I recognised her in a moment, and I think she recognised me, for she showed ever so slight a confusion when I made my errand clear.

"I have brought a telegram for Mr. Alston," I said.

"Oh—won't you—please come in," she returned, seeing that I was obviously not a telegraph messenger.

I hesitated, but the coincidence of her being there and of Alston's confidence made me somewhat curious. I did not refuse, though I had no real excuse for accepting. I entered the hall, saying "I don't think there's any necessity to trouble you. If you will kindly let Mr. Alston have that"—

"Yes, yes," she interposed hastily, and at that moment Alston himself entered the hall from an adjoining room. His quick eyes embraced the situation without a word and he came forward.

"It's very good of you, Lieutenant," he said courteously. "It's no end kind of you."

"Oh, I wanted the walk," I explained, and looked at the girl. He had the pleasant formality of his country.

"Lieutenant Kerslake has been so very good as to bring me out this cable from the hotel," he explained to the girl. "No end kind of him, isn't it, Sylvia?" He glanced at me. "This is Miss Lovell, Mr. Kerslake."

It was an introduction, although we had met before, and I bowed. I was aware that her eyes were dancing on me inquisitively, as they might safely do in that light. "Come in, Mr. Kerslake," invited the American, and with the re-enforcement of his request I hesitated no longer. We passed into an interior drawing-room of considerable size, panelled in oak, but lighted very weakly by a lamp on a central table. The girl merely went through into a room beyond, as though leaving us to any communications together we desired; and I had somehow the idea that Alston had something to say.

He was as amiable and unconcerned as ever, as veritable a dilettante to the eye as you might meet on a leisurely holiday.

"Do you mind my opening this thing?" he asked with some contempt of the thing, when I was seated; and when I had replied, "You'll have

a little whiskey with me, after your walk, won't you?"

He moved across the room towards the bell, reading his telegram, and having rung came back to me still occupied in reading. His face in the light was expressive; amusement, contempt and indifference seemed to chase across his features. He put the cable in his pocket carelessly. "Now then," said he heartily as the maid arrived. "The whiskey and glasses, please Jenny." He twinkled at me, "I've learned to drink Scotch over here," he said. "It's cleaner than our Bourbon somehow. It sort of rounds up an evening. I guess I'll leave off when I get back, but this climate exacts it. It's a sort of civility to the damp air which keeps your lawns so exquisite. Look at Carisbrooke Castle yonder. I think I'd put up with a relaxed throat or two to get a green like that, especially as there's the whiskey cure," he remarked smilingly. "What I like is the unanimity with which a whole smoking-room orders its Scotch and soda after dinner. It's like grace after supper. The British constitution isn't complete without it. It's the coping stone of the day's work. Our countrymen don't understand its insinuating virtues. Say, by the bye, wasn't there another from my way landed at the hotel, did you say?"

He handed me a cigar, lighted one himself, and poured out two jorums of the spirit.

"The schooner-yacht's American," I answered.

"Ah!" he puffed as he used the syphon. "I'm here as lodger; that's why I make free, you see." He nodded his head towards the door. A charming woman, Mrs. Lovell, but there have been disabilities." He reclined in his chair lazily.

"Oh, he's at the hotel then?"

"Yes," I said catching his drift. "The schooner's inside, so I suppose he contemplates a stay."

What he was going to say I cannot tell, for an interruption occurred in the entrance of a lady. She was about middle height, had a young figure and a face with claims to good looks. She was essentially "elegant" in the old phrase, and her expression seemed to appeal to you, to inquire of you, to express confidence in you. I guessed her at once, and before the introduction, as Mrs. Lovell. Her manner was at once shy and dignified, and it was easy (I thought) to see in her the woman of good family and perhaps of once good fortune, reduced to playing landlady to well-to-do Americans. Alston had a gracious caressing way with her which was quite charming, and under which she sensibly warmed. The poor lady, as it seemed to me, basked in the sun of his prosperity.

"Mrs. Lovell," said he playfully, "has been acting as my cicerone round your island. I don't want any better dragoman or woman.

I've no room for any. She's keen on historic places and that just suits me, I guess."

As he spoke Miss Lovell joined the party, and he cast a glance at her, half-whimsical, half-affectionate. There could be no longer any doubt in my mind. This was the English girl of whom he had spoken, whom he was to marry to "even the balance." Well, they were well-matched in handsome looks, though I had an insular prejudice in favour of our own style of beauty. Mrs. Lovell's gaze appeared to be directed on her daughter with some anxiety; but Sylvia Lovell said nothing, only looked at me, her lips parting slightly as if in unconscious wonder. She was even more of a girl here than I had thought her on the downs, and showed an unselfconscious naiveté in her bearing that was somehow delightfully attractive.

I had intruded long enough, and rose to go. Alston rose also, and offered to put me on the road. It might have been mere courtesy, but I could not help feeling that he had not managed to say what he wanted to say before Mrs. Lovell's appearance, and that he would revert to the topic when we were alone. Still it was of no personal interest to me, and I took leave of the ladies. As we went out, I a little in advance of Alston, I noticed, turning to raise my hat, that he put out an arm with a playful proprietorial air towards the

girl, and with equal distinctness I saw her draw back. Perhaps she observed that my face was towards them, even in the twilight of the stars, yet it struck me that she winced, that she shrank as from a familiarity which she had not courted, withdrew into the deeper obscurity of the doorway; and as she did so the swinging lamp of the hall illumined for an instant her face, and I saw its expression. It was that of a terrified child.

By contrast with the ill-lighted hall the stars seemed a little brighter under the open heaven, and we walked in silence for a time, I on my part sending back some reflections towards the girl in the porch and her relation to my companion.

"You probably made the mistake of bearing to the left too much," said he at last, referring to my blunder on the way out from Bembridge. "I've got to know the road well."

"You've been long here?" I could not but inquire casually. He reflected. "A few weeks. I like an hotel as a rule better than a house, Mr. Kerslake, but there are occasions when one prefers a house."

He laughed. "Then the lady—" I began, for clearly one need not stand on too much ceremony with so communicative an acquaintance.

"Yes; you've guessed it first time," he assented pleasantly. "Miss Lovell's going to help square the balance, I hope."

I murmured that he was very fortunate, and expressed a formal wish for the prosperity of so interesting and international a union. But I was wondering why he walked with me. Was it really only amiability? As the thought went through my mind I chanced to look back across the field into which we had turned by a stile, and the loom of a figure crossing the stile blotted a patch of stars. A sense of familiarity with it dawned on me at once; it was almost with recognition that my mind went back to the passage of another field and of a figure against the sky. I paused and stared, and my companion looked at me.

"I don't know," said I in explanation, "it's odd; but I seem to have seen that fellow before. He crossed a field with me when I came."

"Did he?" inquired Alston, and added, "You didn't take a field-path, did you? You crossed a field anyhow."

"I took it blindly," said I.

"Then," said he, "This fellow—"

"Well, it looks as if he was interested in me," I admitted.

He had resumed walking, and was silent for some little time. "You don't boast road agents here, Mr. Kerslake," he said then, "maybe he's a tramp."

"He may be," said I, "but as I am of an in-

quisitive nature, and dislike unsolved riddles I think I'll make sure."

He said nothing, but waited on what I should do. What I did was to mount the stile which made connection with the road and turn aside into the shelter of the hedge. He took up his position by me, without a word, and we listened.

The sound of a man's progress came off the field, reaching us softly at first, and then with the emphasis of increasing proximity; and presently we could hear someone at the stile. A figure darkened the gap in the hedge and descended in a light leap to the road. As it did so I put out the heavy walking-stick I carried horizontally into the blackness of the shade he cast; his knees took it, he staggered, and fell forward with both hands instinctively outstretched to save himself. Stepping out of concealment I caught him and bore him up.

"Hulloa!" said I, "come over too quickly?"

He stood up, and under the faint light I could make out his face; it was that of the yacht-hand I had noticed, the tall meagre man with gaps in his teeth. He muttered thanks and hastened away, and I was left with Alston who had not budged from the hedge. Now he came forward.

"Well?" said he, "Tramp? or pickpocket?"

I picked up my stick which had been wrenched out of my hands.



"He staggered, and fell forward with both hands instinctively outstretched to save himself"



"Neither," said I laconically. I felt he was waiting, and I was somehow satisfied that he should wait. I took off my hat to the cool breezes of the evening. "But I've seen him before," I resumed as if meditating, "I think he was one of the sailors I noticed on the yacht that came in to-day."

There was a little pause ere he spoke, and then, "Well, if he's American you're safe enough," he said jocularly.

"Oh, I'm all right," I replied easily, "and really I don't see why I should bother you to come out of your way so far. I've got the road."

"I owed that to you at any rate," said Alston. "You were good about that cable. And I don't know that I need have troubled you after all."

"Business matters—" I began.

"Business! I'm here on something better," he interrupted laughing. Besides I might have waited comfortably till to-morrow, I daresay I'll see you then, Mr. Kerslake. You see, I've left my motor-tricycle at the hotel and must fetch it. He made a pause and then added, as it seemed inconsequently, "that was a very neat trick of yours with the stick, neat and prompt. You're a man of resources."

"I'm only a sailor," said I modestly.

He gave me goodnight, and strode off; and as I resumed my journey to Bembridge I wondered

why he had been so anxious to avoid the hotel all the afternoon, and now was willing to visit it in the morning. It puzzled me, as did indeed all the factors in the situation.

## CHAPTER III

### THE SECOND MAN

I BREAKFASTED early on the following morning, and, having given some orders about the despatch of my luggage to the station, entered the smoking-room to look at a paper and enjoy a cigar. The windows were open, and the sea was calling on the beach through the fine sunshine. I had hardly settled to my news when I heard my name, and looking up saw Alston. He was debonair and smiling, with that air of negligent attention which I had detected in him and he flung himself down opposite to me after expressing a civil hope that he was not disturbing me. We exchanged remarks on some different topics between intervals of perusing our papers, and then suddenly he rose, dropping his journal.

"Wilson Rudgwick, as I live!" he cried in a cheerful voice. I turned, and there was the clean-shaven man who had arrived in the yacht.

"Alston!" said he, and grinned. They shook hands.

"Sit down," said Alston. "This is my friend Wilson Rudgwick, Lieutenant Kerslake, come over

to look up the old country, and see if it's anchored off Europe, as usual. Though he's no stranger to it, eh, Wilson?"

"Lancashire born," said the other briefly, and now I recognised a mingling of accents in his voice.

"And how's the business going?" inquired Alston.

"A bit easier," said Rudgwick, biting the end from a cigar. "That's why I'm here."

"You're here for pleasure?" I inquired politely.

"Some," was his laconic reply.

"Mr. Rudgwick unites pleasure and business," explained his friend. "There's never an occasion when Wilson Rudgwick refuses to do business, even here, eh?"

"If I get on a good line, here too," admitted the new-comer. "But say, Alston, what brings you here? I had an idea of my own that you'd maybe be in Montana."

Alston shook his head. "I've no use for Montana at the moment. Montana's all right, but you can get fed up on Montana. I'm here on the same business as yourself."

"To get rid of dollars," said Rudgwick. "Well I suppose we're mighty fools, yet a sovereign will go further than five dollars, and that's how I pay my yachting expenses,—with the margin. You staying long?"

Alston crossed his legs. "Long as I like it," he returned. He did not seem to me so communicative as I was used to seeing him, though wholly at his ease.

"You ought to have done business with me away in Chicago," remarked the older man after a pause. "It would pay you best to deal with our house."

"Oh, I'm not keen on a deal. I can wait," said the other smiling. "Some fellows, my dear Wilson can't resist the temptation of concluding a bargain nohow, as long as they see dollars in it. Now, dollars are a bit over-estimated, seems to me. It's what they'll buy that matters, and if I give up health or a fortnight's good time to make ten thousand dollars, I've got to reckon up if it's worth while."

To my surprise Rudgwick broke into a hearty chuckle at this, which increased as he eyed his companion.

"I conclude there's some sense in what you say," he said at last. "You hang onto things in the right way, Alston. And as it appears you're here for pleasure, I believe I can help you. There's my yacht now. What's the matter with a Mediterranean trip?"

"You're too good, Rudgwick," said his friend. "You're just almighty good, and I should love to. But, say, is that your black-hulled schooner out there?"

"That's so," nodded the other.

"She looks trig. I should like to see her foot it. Could we have a turn this afternoon, Wilson?"

Rudgwick blew the smoke from his mouth. "I'll fix it," said he. "You staying here?"

"No; I'm a bit in the interior of this continent," said Alston without hesitation. "I'm Sandown way—quarters in a real English rural old-fashioned place. Reminds you of Stratford-on-Avon and Kenilworth all in one."

"Well, come along after lunch," said Rudgwick as he rose, with an inclination of his head which rather curtly included me.

Now I had been conscious all along that there was something underneath the two men's talk, that in a way, they were fencing with each other. I do not think I should have noticed it in the manner of either, or in any words actually passing between them, but I was prepared by my previous discoveries for latent hostility, and in the light of my knowledge I read thrust and riposte in every sentence. What it was between them I did not know, nor was it any affair of mine. But that I was not wrong hardly needed the assurance of Alston's words to me when the older man was gone.

"Mr. Rudgwick's partner in a big wheat business in Chicago," he said, "and he's pretty smart but he's not so smart as he thinks himself. He

wanted a deal with me over mines—Montana mines, but I didn't see it. No; Wilson Rudgwick knows a lot about packing and wheat, but he don't know much about mines. I reckon he's a little late for a deal now. And he'll begin to find it out."

He smiled, shook hands with almost effusive friendliness and went out. An hour later I left Bembridge for Ryde on my way to Portsmouth, under the distinct impression that I had seen the last of my American, and all associated with him. Yet the world is a small place, after all, and the Isle of Wight is a smaller. Indeed it is a ridiculous toy piece broken off the Hampshire coast, and one feels one must perforce knock up against every one in it several times a day, as one encounters the same faces in a village street. So at the pierhead at Ryde, while waiting for the Portsmouth boat, I happened upon Alston once more. He was in the company of ladies, and I at once recognised the younger. It was Miss Lovell, dressed in light muslin with a light dust-coat almost to her heels which the fresh breezes off Spithead were blowing about her. Her face was delicately pink under the threshing of the wind but she seemed to me to have a dispirited air, and stood helplessly against the railway station while Alston bustled about among the porters. My way lay past her, and our glances met. I stopped, lifting my hat, and she impulsively offered her hand.

"You're crossing?" I asked, and was answered by her companion whom I now saw to be her mother.

"Yes, we're going to town, Mr. Kerslake—for a few days." She spoke I thought with some triumph in her voice.

"I saw Mr. Alston just now," I went on.

"Yes, he's going up with us," explained Mrs. Lovell. "It won't be rough, will it? I'm such a bad sailor."

I looked out across the strait. "Those are only foam-heads," said I. "There's no substance in them. They're mere decorative rosettes of spume on a placid sea, dissolving even as they form."

I was conscious that Miss Lovell was looking at me inquiringly, and it was rather an earnest, wondering glance, almost as if she were trying to weigh me in her mind. And then Alston caught sight of me, and waved his hand cordially as he came up.

"Well met on the Rialto," he called. "I wonder, are we crossing together? That would be bully."

"Crossing, are you, Fordyce?" said a sharp crisp voice which singled itself suddenly out of the many voices of the pier.

Alston swung round, as did I, and there was Rudgwick, swart of face, square of figure, with a billy-cock on the back of his head.

"Wilson! Bully for you! Are you going over too? We'll have a regular party." This was in Alston's regulation affable manner.

Rudgwick did not reply, but fixed his gaze on the women, and instantly the younger man responded to that interrogatory stare.

"Let me introduce you, Mr. Rudgwick, to Mrs. Lovell, and Miss Lovell." He made the presentation gracefully; and as Rudgwick lifted his hat I was struck by the shadow on his face. It was like the shadow of a grin, and a grin that was rather sardonic; but it was gone when he turned to Alston with:

"Now, it seems like we've got to wait a bit for that boat yonder. Alston, what's the matter with my boat? Couldn't she take the ladies on as easy as this orthodox craft that's coming along?"

Alston gave one glance out upon the Solent, where I recognised the black hull of Rudgwick's schooner, and then the eyes of the two men met, Rudgwick's impassive, the younger man's slightly supercilious and smiling.

"She's at your disposal, Fordyce," said the former.

"You're good all through, Wilson," said Alston laughing. "But I reckon we can get along more easily with the steamer."

"Now, I've taken a fancy to have you on that yacht," persisted Rudgwick. "You and the

ladies." He ignored me which Alston would certainly not have done. "Say, can't I persuade you?"

Alston shook his head, and threw a glance out of his quick eyes towards the incoming boat. He appeared to be considering, and the other watched him. I watched both, for again I had the definite impression that some duel was covertly in progress.

"If I can't," went on Rudgwick after a pause, "I'm unhappy, but I recollect anyhow you're coming along this afternoon, Fordyce."

I remembered now the engagement which had been made in my presence earlier in the morning.

Alston, if he had not forgotten, had ignored this, for was he not bound for London for a few days? But he showed no signs of being disturbed.

"I was wiring to you about that—to put that off," he said.

"That so?" Rudgwick nodded. "Then if I'm not going to see you to-day again, we'd better fix that other matter up. You must give me five minutes, Fordyce. I think I can manage it all in five minutes."

"Certainly," Alston shrugged his shoulders gracefully. "Your pardon, ladies. Mr. Kerslake, I trust them to you for five minutes."

I was not loth to undertake the trust, and entered into conversation when the two men had gone. It seemed to me that the Montana mine was

developing a more open hostility between them. It was Mrs. Lovell who did most of the talking. She was something between excited and anxious, and she cast glances about the pier as if afraid they would lose the boat. Her daughter was very silent and still, and now I wondered if this was the same girl who had struck me as filled with such natural gaiety on Bembridge downs two days before.

Alston returned alone, with serene unruffled brow, and said equably:

"My dear Mrs. Lovell, I am chagrined, but I have news from my friend, Wilson Rudgwick, which will postpone this visit. Will you forgive me? Nothing, as you may guess, but the most weighty reasons would have induced me to put this off; but I'm merely drift-wood this moment. That's the way of us business-men. However, if I can get through, we'll make a start a bit later."

He turned to Miss Lovell—"Sylvia, dear delightful name, can you pardon this unpardonable thing?"

He spoke with soft tenderness, but somehow I did not like his air. Perhaps his proprietary manner offended me. He was adjusting the balance altogether too magnificently by his capture of this beautiful girl. As he spoke he took her hand, and she left it in his grasp.

"Oh, of course," she assented in a conventional

way: and then withdrew from his touch; and as she turned the expression on her face altered; it showed obvious and unmitigated relief. She was glad not to be going.

Alston turned to me. "I havn't finished my business yet," he said. "Rudgwick's waiting for me. Would you mind, like a very good fellow, seeing the ladies into the train?"

I expressed the pleasure I should have in the operation, and he went off with less than his usual urbanity. Something abrupt had crept into his manner, which was, no doubt, "business." I had the impression that he would not have an easy time with his friend Rudgwick.

Mrs. Lovell was manifestly disappointed; and with difficulty kept her manifestations within the good manners of convention. She deprecated in a plaintive way the exactions of business, obviously keeping hold on herself with effort. "Americans are supposed to be greater victims to it than our own men, aren't they, Mr. Kerslake?" she appealed. "It is a shame Mr. Alston should have his holiday spoiled, and he's so very thoughtful too and considerate. Sylvia dear, are you sure all the luggage is here?"

I gave my services unreservedly to the luggage which I succeeded in collecting, and showed the ladies to their carriage. Miss Lovell was a little formal in her manner, but had brightened per-

ceptibly. Her mother was harassed and rather staccato in conversation. Meanwhile I was sure I was missing the boat, but I did not mind. The train lingered to take up the arrivals from Portsmouth, and the platform was crowded with porters and passengers, the station noisy with rattling hand-trucks.

I stood by the carriage door, exchanging sentences with Mrs. Lovell, who kept craning her head out as if in the hope of seeing Alston return.

"I wonder how long his business will last," she confided in me. "He's such a conscientious man. I know he would not have altered his plans if it hadn't been—" She paused, a frown of perplexity and annoyance on her comely face. "Have you known Mr. Alston long?"

I answered in the negative without committing myself to details or dates. I daresay Alston's own cordial manner gave an erroneous impression as to our relations. At any rate she had by this time relaxed her guard on herself; she was warmed to confidence either by my friendliness or by her conjecture of my friendship with Alston.

"He's very active, isn't he? Are all Americans like—Do you think that's he over there? Oh no it's—"

I asked in my turn if he were an old acquaintance of hers, on which she looked at me directly. She had her daughter's directness of vision.

"Not very long," she said. "Perhaps you're wondering—"

I was, but I wondered more what she had been going to say.

"You see," she said, lowering her voice. "It's very upsetting considering the circumstances."

"It's certainly annoying to have one's plans upset," I murmured, looking at Miss Lovell, who was gazing out of the other window in a brown study. The mother followed my gaze.

"Of course it would naturally upset her," she whispered.

"Naturally," I assented.

"You know—Mr. Alston has told you?" she asked.

"I understand that he is a fortunate man," I said evasively.

"This is terrible—almost like a blow," the poor lady blurted confidentially. "You see, it was to have taken place to-morrow."

It flashed upon me what she meant. "The marriage?" I said. She nodded, pursing her lips warningly. "In London. That's why we were going."

Perhaps she told me this because she imagined me to be a friend of Alston's; perhaps it was only her garrulous nature. She was greatly flustered, and had lost her head.

"Well, there is still to-morrow," I said reason-

ingly, as the train moved out slowly. I took off my hat. Mrs. Lovell turned in a flutter to see if everything was in the carriage, and to my salutation only a grave but friendly smile responded over her head.

I walked out upon the pierhead, and there was my boat two hundred yards away en route for Portsmouth. Well, if I had lost it, it seemed foolish to wait there; so I took the electric tramway to the town and walked up Union Street. It was a surprise to me that Alston had been to all intents and purposes on his wedding-journey. He had been going to London to be married. I wondered what business might be so pressing, so urgent, as to be excuse for the interruption. It seemed on the first sight of it monstrous, but then as Mrs. Lovell had plaintively observed "business" has a bigger hold in America and on Americans. If Alston were faced with disaster I could perhaps understand his sudden desertion. No doubt it was practical wisdom to clear the way for the train, to have the track ready, as it were. But frankly I could not have left the girl as he had done; I should have let Rudgwick and Montana go hang together, and steamed equably into Waterloo.

In the midst of these reflections I reached the door of the Bodega, and entered for a glass of wine. It was vastly better than the refresh-

ment bar at the station, and less formidable than the coffee-room of a big hotel. I sat at the counter and sipped my sherry, and cocked an eye over some illustrated papers. Presently from the recesses came the tread of advancing feet with corresponding voices. My back was towards the persons and I did not turn; but out of the tail of an idle eye perceived them as they passed away towards the street door. It was Alston and his friend, or enemy, Rudgwick, and two sentences emerged to me from their talk somewhat louder than the low level of it. One was in Rudgwick's incisive accents, and seemed to clinch an argument.

"Well, now, we understand each other, Fordyce, and I reckon it's just as well we had this talk."

"I'm agreeable," said Alston, "I'm always ready to stake out a ring, Wilson."

On that they drifted out, evidently on terms of reconciliation. It looked as if they had settled their differences over Montana mines, and I should not like to have had to say with which lay the victory. Rudgwick had business graven on every line of his determined face, but perhaps Alston was more diplomatic. He might have imagination, which is, or may be, the secret of success even in business.

When I was in the Portsmouth boat I had this brought home to me, for Alston crossed with

me, much to his gratification. He was very talkative, mainly about Rudgwick.

"We settled everything," he remarked complacently. "There was a big cañon between us, but we bridged it. There isn't much of a fissure now, though we're on opposite sides, so to speak."

"Montana?" I inquired.

He nodded. "Wilson Rudgwick's clever, but he's not so clever as he thinks or looks. If he sees a thing ahead he's got good eyes and sizes it up. He draws a bead on a distant object as well as any man I know. But it's just got to be there, and that's where he misses things. He can't see what isn't there, and he ought to. What you want is to skin your eyes closer than any other man, and get on the horizon. There's some that can't get away back farther than the foreground, and some can fetch away to the middle distance. But the man that wants to come out on top must be prepared to adjudicate on the horizon every time."

Thus was the philosophy of business unfolded to me apropos of Montana mines. I was interested, for the point of view and the phrasing of it alike were new to me.

"Yes, we've fixed up a working arrangement," continued Alston. "And I don't suppose we'll quarrel over that, at any rate, though when it

comes to the end Rudgwick won't laugh. But it's all right and pleasant now."

Why then was he going to Portsmouth and London, and not to the Manor House and the distressed ladies?

You will think that all these questions in my own mind concerning the parties were inspired by undue curiosity, but the fact was that Alston's confidences, together with the coincidences I have already related, practically thrust them upon me. I had to be interested so long as I travelled with these incidents for company. And I was doomed to travel with them longer; but that, I confess, was my own doing. It came about in this way.

When we reached Portsmouth I lost sight of Alston for a time in the bustle of the station, but saw him presently issuing from the telegraph office.

"Say, Mr. Kerslake," he hailed me. "Are you going back to the hotel to-night?"

Now my luggage had been landed from the steamer, and was already being deposited in the cloak-room in preparation for my departure to London that evening. And I had mapped out for myself a fairly full afternoon. In his pre-occupation with his own affairs Alston had not troubled to inquire about my movements, and it appeared that he thought I was still staying at

Bembridge. I hesitated for no earthly reason that I could have told you then, or could analyse now, and he went on quickly:

"Oh, it's all right. I thought you might be getting back to-night, and I wanted a favour of you. It's these blamed mails of yours. I don't exactly trust them. I've sent a wire, but I wanted a letter to reach to-night. I guess I'll express it off, right away."

"I'll have it sent," I said.

I need not have said it, but I knew what the letter was. The telegram had gone to Mrs. Lovell in explanation of his departure; the letter was in full explanation and was addressed to Miss Lovell.

"No; I won't worry you," he said pleasantly.

"I'm going back," said I. "I can have it sent this evening."

Alston did not interest me more than a little, and I did not care two straws about Rudgwick. But I had been tumbled somehow into their affairs, and I could not get out. Frankly I knew what it was. There were several influences at work on me, but I could not but recognise that one was the most powerful. I was interested in Sylvia Lovell, and the eclipse of her dancing eyes. It was a ridiculous thing to abandon all my plans on an impulse, but I have always been of too precipitate a nature for entire worldly

success. I have always consoled myself by assuring myself that if I have impetuosity, I have resolution, and do not go back on my impulses. Unhappily analysis comes to precipitate people oftentimes too late, and they see the errors of their course behind them. Yet I have known many advantages arising out of a quick rash mind. I put out my hand.

"It's real good of you," said Alston, shaking it, as he gave me the letter. "I don't think I'd have time to send it off myself. The train's due to start now. I hope we'll meet again soon, Mr. Kerslake. Goodbye, and I won't forget your kindness."

He was swept into the train, and I watched it wind out of the station. Then my eyes left it and wandered to the superscription on the envelope. Contrary to my expectation it was addressed to Mrs. Lovell in a bold and rather formal hand. Then I looked up, and a man was watching me across the platform

## CHAPTER IV

### THE ABDUCTION

I RETURNED to Ryde after dinner, and took the train to Brading, which was the nearest station to Bessenton Manor. I had "no use," as Alston might have said, for express messengers when I could take the place myself almost en route for Bembridge. I sent forward my bag by rail, and in the gathering twilight climbed the slopes towards the sea. When I had reached Bessenton it was gloaming, and the light lingered only in the open spaces of the garden. To the right of the house was a neat lawn giving on the flower borders which parted it from a tangled orchard, and here I caught a glimpse of a woman's figure. Conventionally I should have rapped on the door; what I did was to turn aside upon the sward and approach her.

"Good evening, Miss Lovell," said I. "I have a letter for your mother."

She had started slightly, and it was a moment ere she replied.

"Thank you so much. I will take it to her."

She reappeared within two minutes, which

allowed me to deduce that she had not waited to hear the letter read.

"Isn't it perfectly charming?" she said.

"Is the Island your native place?" I asked.

"Yes; this was my father's house, but—" she paused. "He has been dead a long time."

I told her how much I admired the situation, and was falling into a pleasant talk, when Mrs. Lovell's voice was heard calling from the house.

"Sylvia! Sylvia!" she cried, and there was an unusual flutter in it.

The girl turned her head, and began to walk with due deliberation across the lawn. She must have known that there was news concerning her lover, yet she showed no sign of haste or excitement. I accompanied her.

"Sylvia! he's gone to London; he's gone to get—" Then conscious of my presence she stopped. "How kind of you to bring this!" she declared warmly. "We were anxious. The telegram didn't—Sylvia love, you must read this."

She put the letter in her daughter's hand with agitation, which the girl did not exhibit. On the contrary she went slowly into the drawing-room and held the paper to the light.

"But—mother—" she looked up, and an expression of dismay crossed her face. She folded the letter, handed it back and with a sudden impulsiveness went out of the room. She had

appeared to be on the eve of exhibiting some emotion, and to have gone lest she should betray herself. Her mother watched her anxiously, and turned a care-worn face on me. She had accepted me now outright as Alston's friend who was in his confidence. "She is naturally excited," she explained. "Poor Sylvia! With these changes— You know how it is, Mr. Kerslake. It's—it's very upsetting to a girl, of course. I wonder if—"

She fluttered towards the door as if she would follow her daughter, but refrained. "Of course it will be pleasanter that she should be married from her home, much nicer."

"Much," I assented wondering.

"If we had gone to town it would have been stiffer, and less home-like, if somewhat grander," said the lady. "Whereas at Brading or—" she opened the letter again. "'Somewhere in your beautiful island,'" she read. "But it would have to be Brading, of course. That's our parish. Dear me, would it be possible to get married in two days, Mr. Kerslake?" as a fresh doubt assailed her.

"With a special license," I explained.

"Oh, yes, that will be all right then, because he's gone to get that in London, and he'll be back the last train to-morrow night."

"He wants the wedding soon?" I asked.

"The following day," she replied, again consulting the letter.

Alston was in a hurry, and it struck me as precipitate. I was not particularly pleased at the prospect, and I thought that the girl was not; but perhaps it was on the score of her trousseau, or it might have been mere maidenly embarrassment.

The mother emitted a sigh of relief and smiled. "Americans are quicker than we, aren't they? I suppose they carry their new-fashioned ways even into marriage, and hustle along, as they call it."

"I gather that Mr. Alston is not the sort of man to lose time at anything," I remarked casually.

She might have determined from that statement my unfamiliarity with the American, but she did not. She was a self-concentrated woman with an anxious outlook.

"It only took him two weeks to get engaged," she said with a smile of one who has triumphed.

"And he has been engaged?" I queried frankly this time, for I wanted to make a calculation.

"One week!" she smiled very broadly into my face as if she invited me to tolerate the impetuosity of love.

But instead I made my easy calculation. Alston had arrived in the island three weeks ago; had proposed to Miss Lovell within a fortnight, and was to be married under the month. It did

have the air of impetuosity, but I had not thought Alston was so impetuous as that.

Mrs. Lovell sat down. "Of course, I need not say I'm relieved it did turn out so," she said confidentially. "Mr. Alston is everything that one could desire in a son-in-law. He is a gentleman, and has good manners, and he is consideration itself. There's something in the attitude of the American man towards women that is very attractive. They're so chivalrous."

"They have more manner than we," I agreed. "But I don't know that I could say manners."

"Oh, they're charming. And of course it really is a good thing for Sylvia. This old house and—" She shrugged her shoulders. "It would have been different had my husband lived. But perhaps it is all for the best."

She sighed complacently, while my eyes went to the portrait of a handsome man of middle age that hung over the mantelpiece. It was a jocund face, of rather full habit, with a sparkle in the eye, and a general aspect of resolution. If this were Mr. Lovell, as he lived, I was sure things might have been different, had he lived. The faded gentility of the room and outlook could hardly have subsisted with the presence of that full-blooded man. I seemed to glimpse now the course of this love-affair, and to take a little suspicion of it. I wished that the girl might

return, when my inquisitive eyes could examine hers with deeper scrutiny. Her emotion had driven her forth, but what emotion? I began to guess, and I thought I was guessing right. Here was a wealthy and an ardent wooer, and on the other hand an anxious and embarrassed mother, and a girl with childish eyes. The solution appeared to be inevitable. The problem had been solved so many hundred times before that it had come to be almost part of nature. And after all I reflected that Alston was not a bad fellow. But Sylvia Lovell did not return, and I took my departure, perhaps a little abruptly.

I reached Bembridge about ten o'clock, and the first man I saw at the hotel was Rudgwick, Rudgwick smoking a long cigar and drinking a whiskey and soda, Rudgwick with his soft hat tilted over his forehead, plunged in profound meditation. He came out of it forthright, greeting me.

"That you, Mr. Kerslake?" he said. "Come away here, and keep me company. I thought you'd gone."

"I go to-morrow afternoon," said I taking a seat.

He gave me a steady look in his calculating way. "Well, I can put in a week or two here, I guess, if this weather holds. I'm going to find time to learn golf, which my friend Alston

recommends to me as a game to keep your mind off business. It's like whiskey and soda, maybe; you want the soda to mix with the whiskey."

"Most golfers would call their holidays mere soda water without golf to inspirit them," I said.

"Is that so? Well, I'm going to learn, and when Alston comes back he shall give me wrinkles. I suppose he won't be away long."

The tone was almost an inquiry, but it might have been a statement only. I answered it as the first.

"He comes back to-morrow night last train, I believe."

He nodded. "Then we'll make a start next day."

I was interfering in these people's affairs, which were none of mine; but they would force them upon my attention.

"I'm afraid you won't get Mr. Alston's help, that day," I said with a certain bluffness. "As it's his wedding-day."

Rudgwick stared me full in the face for half a minute. His expression underwent no change, save for a little squaring of the already square jaws.

"That so?" he observed at last, "I hadn't a notion it was so near. Fact is, we talked business all along this morning, and hadn't time for mere matrimony. Well, Fordyce is a clever boy and

a smart. I'm not sure he's so smart as he thinks himself, but he's right down smart."

This was so precisely what Alston had said of Rudgwick that the coincidence tickled me.

"And a very pretty girl," he added critically. "A real good sample of the old country at her best." I agreed, and Rudgwick finished his whiskey at a gulp and rose. "I'm going to keep early hours on my vacation," he said. "I'm going to rise fresh as paint every dawn. Say, Fordyce would likely get a special license in London. Business and pleasure combined, eh?"

The black-hulled schooner lay once more in the offing when I pulled aside the curtains of my bed-room window next morning. The sea was as quiet as a nun, and the sun was already well advanced in a serene heaven, giving promise of great heat. Rudgwick I did not see until late in the morning when he visited the hotel, to which I had just returned from a dip in the sea. He was smoking the usual cigar which he took from the grip of his teeth to chaff me. He had evidently no opinion of our English watering-places, and humourously expatiated on the bathing tents.

"I'm English by birth," he said, "and I can afford to say it, while Alston can't, you see. That makes the difference between us. I can patronise your scenery, and he can't, at least not with any decency, while he's over here. When he

gets along there, he can talk if he likes. You known Fordyce long?"

"Our acquaintance is two days old, I think," I told him. "We are merely hotel acquaintances."

"Ah!" he nodded, "I thought from what you said as to his marriage you'd know him pretty well."

"Oh, but you must know that Mr. Alston makes familiarity very easy," said I curtly. "He has short cuts."

Rudgwick laughed. "I suppose he has. He talks at any rate, and talk tells—one way or the other. But Fordyce's garrulousness is about—say, I'd wager that Fordyce didn't specify his marriage to you, Mr. Kerslake."

"No," said I stiffly, "not the exact date. I heard it from Mrs. Lovell."

"Is she an old friend of yours, by any chance?" he inquired bending his obstinate eyes on me.

I was annoyed at this cross-questioning by a stranger and answered shortly: "I've known her a day less than I've known Mr. Alston."

He seemed to recognise that I resented the inquisition, for he laughed good-humouredly, and pointed to his yacht with his cigar.

"Pretty boat, Mr. Kerslake."

I admitted it, for the schooner was a picture, and had already charmed my sailor's eyes.

"She can show a clean pair of heels to anything her own weight," said the owner proudly. "You come along, Mr. Kerslake, and have a look at her. Say, what's the matter with now? You're going this afternoon, you say? Well, I should like your honest opinion as an expert, what you think of her. What do you say?"

"I should like to very much," I answered, for I never can resist a yacht.

Thus it came about that we were being pulled out to the schooner inside five minutes, and that within ten minutes I was standing on the polished white deck of the *Mermaid*.

"My captain, Mr. Jude Bacon, Lieutenant Ker-slake," introduced the proud owner, as a short red-faced man with prominent blue eyes advanced. I looked about me. A sailor was busy with a coil of rope not six paces from me, and turning presented himself fully to me, round of face and puffy, small-eyed and bullet-headed. It was the man who had stared at me in Portsmouth station.

And on that, as if directed by design, my glance alighted on the man who had pursued me to the Manor House two nights before. Had this second man also followed me? Or had it been Alston? I was nothing to anyone of that crew. I was to Rudgwick merely a man who was departing at four o'clock out of his life and Alston's. No;

if anyone had been watched it was Alston. This man had witnessed Alston's departure to London. Perhaps it was "business" again; or it might have been sheer coincidence.

I was soon engaged in an interesting inspection of the schooner which was exhibited to me by Rudgwick with a certain fervour hitherto unperceived in him. He called this man and that, had details bared for my admiration, and wound up with a chaffing remark regarding the America Cup. The boat was not large, but was skilfully designed to combine elegance with comfort, and I envied the owner, as I told him to his delight. What particularly struck me was the commodiousness of the salons and staterooms, which were furnished with all the taste and luxury necessary at the command of a millionaire. In one of the rooms—which Rudgwick called his bureau—was a man at work at a table. He had dark ruffled hair, streaked with grey, an odd bunched-up face, and bright eyes which he fastened on me momentarily as I entered, and then lowered to his papers again. Business was business, I supposed once more, and could not brook interruption even of this transitory character.

We parted on deck very amicably and with mutual compliments.

"So you're off at four?" he asked as I got into the boat which was to take me to the shore. "I'm

glad to have made your acquaintance. Let's see, when is Alston arriving back?"

"Last train to-night," I answered. "Please make him my adieu."

"I will," he returned, and waved a farewell at me.

But I did not leave at four for the simple reason that I was enticed into a foursome, and we played till well on in the afternoon; so that I decided to dine at the hotel and cross later to sleep with a friend at Portsmouth. And when the carriage arrived for myself and my bag I had a sudden inspiration. It was still very hot, but the breath of the downs was cool, and I thought I would drive to Brading by way of Bessenton. It was unconventional, but I thought it would be nice to call on the Lovells and bid them goodbye. I have no excuse to offer except that—well I was interested in Miss Lovell; that was all.

When my carriage was skirting the shoulder of the downs I passed a pedestrian, who looked up quickly, stared at me a moment, and then looked away. It was the man I had seen at Portsmouth, and suspected of following Alston. But he did not remain long in my mind, which went forward to greet Sylvia Lovell, the prospective bride of my acquaintance of two days. It was singular how she returned to the memory. In the narrow lane which led up to the Manor House a carriage was

waiting, the driver idly flicking the hedge with his whip. It was drawn up before no house, and seemed to have no object in its existence. The driver ceased to play with his whip as we passed him and gave us a glance; and I recognised him as the odd-faced man who had been writing in the yacht. I daresay if I had not been so close upon my destination this might have struck me as curious, but I had hardly room to think of coincidences just then. I was engaged in hoping that my intrusion would not be regarded as a liberty. I did not think Mrs. Lovell would look upon it in that light, being as she was fully under the impression that I was a friend of Alston's, but I was uncertain of her daughter. I did not quite know how to estimate her, and I wanted to know. The glow of the sun was dying in the west as I entered the gate.

The maid who opened the door informed me that Mrs. Lovell was not in, but went at once to tell her young mistress of my arrival; and presently Sylvia Lovell entered the room in an obvious state of unrest.

I explained that I had come to make my adieux, and that the carriage was waiting to carry me to the station.

"My mother," she said, "has gone to Ryde unfortunately. She—she will be sorry to have missed you."

I did not know that I was honestly sorry to have missed her; and I sat down to take advantage of the situation.

"Are you leaving the Island?" she asked.

"Yes. And you?" I asked with a smile.

She coloured. "Oh, I don't know. I suppose—I mean I think Mr. Alston will live in America. He has business there." She had not the air of a happy bride, and was very nervous in her movements.

"The great event is to-morrow?" I asked.

She rose hastily. "I don't know. I—I don't think anything is quite settled," she said confusedly. She made a feint of opening the window wider. The lawn was fading into the shadows of dusk. For a moment she stood with her back to me, looking forth into the evening, while I admired the graceful lines of her figure; and then she turned.

"My mother went to meet Mr. Alston," she said. "He telegraphed," and impulsively she put the telegram in my hand. I liked the little impulsiveness; it betrayed confidence in me, or so I liked to think. I read the telegram.

"Please meet me eight, hotel Ryde, alone, important. Alston."

I looked at the office of despatch and found it was Portsmouth.

"Then Mr. Alston has got back earlier than he expected," I said.

But after that burst of impulse she seemed to have reclined on reserve. "I suppose so," she said formally.

But I too have my impulsive moods, and here was one.

"Miss Lovell," said I, "I have known Mr. Alston two days and a bit, and I have seen you four times at most. I'm going clean out of your lives within ten minutes, indeed two minutes if you resent, as you well may, what I am saying. But—but I have eyes, and frankly do you want any help? Is all quite right? I am impertinent, I know, but I have noticed—"

She had drawn herself together, and gave me a startled look. Then her expression altered, and when she spoke her voice was cold.

"Thank you. I don't quite understand what you mean. I have no doubt you mean to be kind, but aren't you rather portentous?"

I was. I felt an ass, and I took my hat. "Forgive me," said I humbly, "I had no right to address you. I am a foolish person, who tends to build up imaginary structures on the flimsiest foundation. But there, they're in ruins. Good-bye, and may life bring you all happiness!"

I got out of the room awkwardly and blundered down the hall, fumbling at the door. Ere I could get it open Miss Lovell had reached it, and turned the handle. She put out her hand, and in the

dull light I could see her face wholly transfigured. It was alive with feeling.

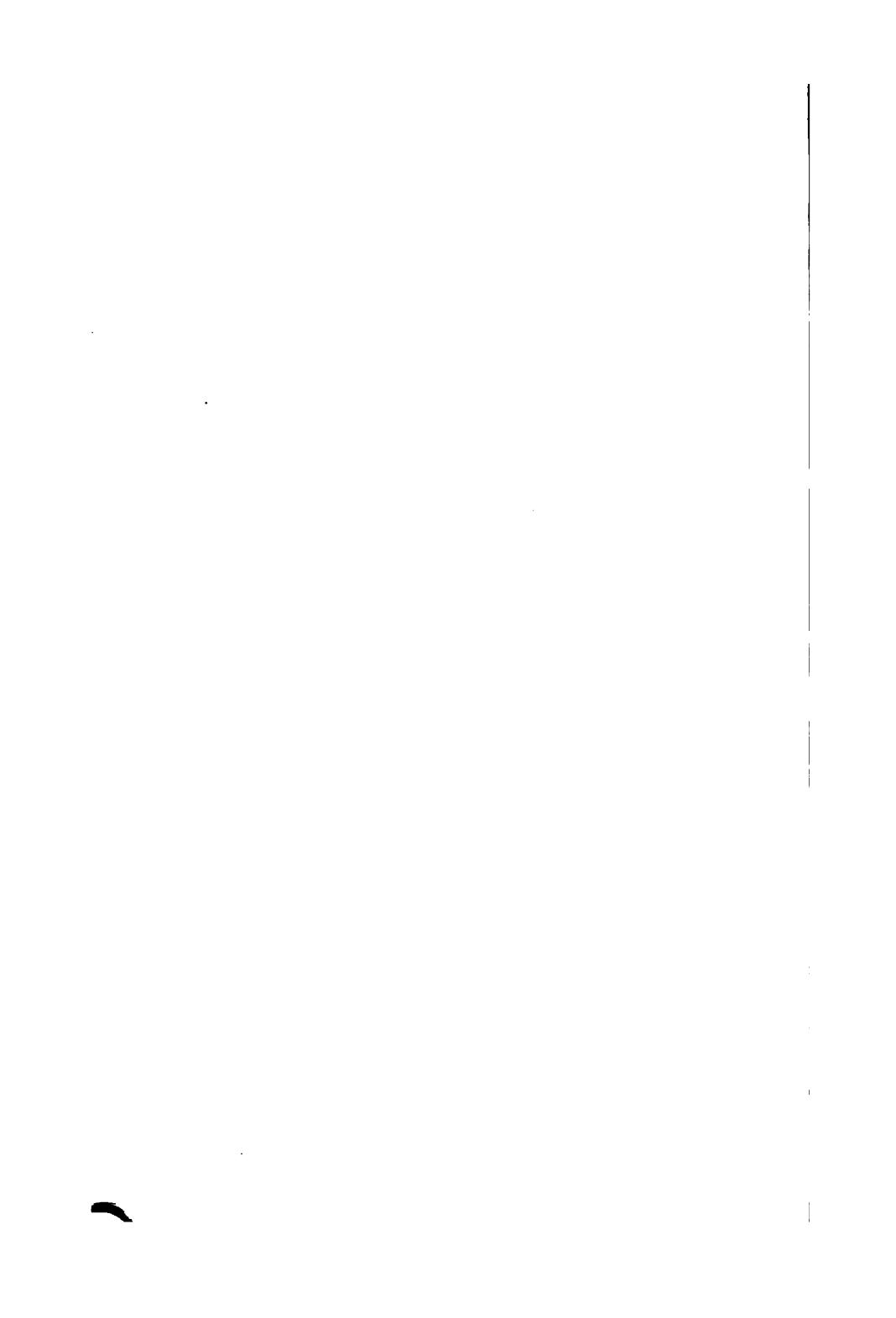
"It was good of you. I didn't mean to hurt you," she stammered. "Please remember I am grateful, only it seemed strange."

"It was unpardonable," said I with a nervous laugh, and on that the words, "God bless you," ran off my tongue ere I knew it. The next moment I was in the lane and in the carriage.

"The station!" I called to the driver in a tumult of confusion and shame, and he whipped up his wiry Island pony, and we rattled down the hill. It was some minutes before I had recovered from my embarrassment, and even then I could not look back on the incident without discomfort. I had violated all the rules and courtesies that bound the mutual relations of acquaintances, and had been put in my place very properly by a slip of a girl. That she had done it so kindly rather aggravated the case, for it would have been less disconcerting to have been bowed out with hauteur. I turned aside for the consideration of my solecism deliberately at last, in the hope of getting into a better frame of mind; and became conscious of the darkling sky. The lane was in the full leafage of summer, and sunk betwixt high hedges; so that we drove in a deeper night than held the stars overhead. It must have been half way to Brading station that I caught the



"The two vehicles crashed into one another in the narrow lane."



sound of an approaching trap, and then suddenly the driver took a corner sharply and the two vehicles crashed into one another in the narrow lane.

I jumped out at once, for one of the occupants of the other carriage was a lady, as I could see by the dress. Also she had called out in alarm. A man beside her followed my example in descending, and we met between the struggling horses.

"Now, was that your fault or ours?" he inquired, and instantly I knew him. It was Alston. Then the lady must be Mrs. Lovell. I revealed myself, but neither repudiated nor accepted responsibility for my driver. No damage had been done. We shook hands heartily.

"Now this is real luck," he said. "Mrs. Lovell, it's Lieutenant Kerslake."

"I have just had the misfortune to miss Mrs. Lovell," said I greeting that lady; and I explained where I had been.

"Ah!" said Alston.

"Miss Lovell told me you had gone to meet Mr. Alston," I explained further.

"Well; that's very interesting, seeing that Mr. Alston didn't think of meeting her," said Alston dryly.

I did not understand, and said nothing. It was the lady who explained volubly.

"Mr. Alston never sent any telegram. I only

met him by accident on the pier. He wasn't at the hotel and so I waited there, and then went to the pierhead and accidentally met him."

"But I saw the wire," I said in surprise.

"That's just what I'm anxious to do," said Alston quickly, "and so if you don't mind we'll get along. Say," he continued as an afterthought, "You staying at Bembridge last night?"

"Yes."

"Did you see Rudgwick there?"

"Yes; I visited his yacht to-day."

He was silent a moment, and then his voice had changed. "I don't like this—I don't like this wire. See here, Mr. Kerslake, will you come along with us? Can't you stay awhile? Coachman, how long will it take you to get to Bessenton, driving like hell? Come along, Mr. Kerslake. Damn it, I'm not done yet. You come along. There's something in this. I don't like it—I don't like it."

His voice was no longer sleek, but harsh; he had in a moment cast his whole temperament, and now I could see or hear rather, a new Alston, perhaps a Montana Alston of the mining camp. But the new note alarmed me, bringing to a head a host of misgivings and suspicions which I had never really formulated. I could not have gone forward now to Brading if I had tried; and so, hardly troubling to make a formal assent to his

proposal, and not questioning further into his motives, I had the carriage turned and followed after him. What he said or what face he showed to his companion during the rest of the journey I do not know. I was occupied on my part with vague fears and above all with a sense of bewilderment. What did it all mean?

When I reached the door Mrs. Lovell and Alston had already preceded me by a few minutes; and I entered the room to the sound of a woman's shrieks. Mrs. Lovell was on the sofa in a collapse, and Alston stood by her, a frown bitten deep in his brow. He looked up when he heard me.

"Will you pass the water, Mr. Kerslake," he asked. "She's hysterical."

"What—what—has happened?" I said anxiously.

He threw a glance at me, as he administered the water.

"Miss Lovell's gone," said he shortly.

"Gone!" I echoed.

"Abducted!" he said still coolly.

"Abducted!" I repeated. Abducted! What indeed did it all mean?

## CHAPTER V

### MORNING GLORY

ALSTON stood looking down on the hysterical woman with pre-occupation and indifference in his eye. It was undoubtedly annoying that Mrs. Lovell should so inconveniently have given way, but it was hardly to be wondered at in a woman of her excitable and anxious temperament. Her daughter abducted! The idea seemed grotesque, anachronistic, out of keeping with that quiet rural scenery and those homely shores.

Alston threw the handkerchief he held on the table.

"Take charge here like a good man," he said peremptorily, "I've got to make inquiries."

He left the room swiftly without awaiting an answer, and I took up the duty of restoring the lady to her senses. She came to by degrees, becoming meekly plaintive and helpless, as though she had exhausted her capacity for feeling in tears. She spoke in a low tone, as if she had been on her death-bed and offering me her last confidences, while I continued to soothe and

encourage her with what comforting words I might find.

"It was too good to be true. I knew it," she asserted. "Things were going on so well too. I ought to have been warned. But who could have thought of this? Poor Sylvia stolen!"

"There must be some mistake," said I. "Girls are not abducted in this way. Besides who would do it?"

"An enemy," she said, raising herself on her arm, and speaking with bated breath. "An enemy of Mr. Alston's. He says he knows. It's a vendetta or something over there. And he's struck at him this way."

I was silent pondering. My mind flew instantly to Rudgwick. The challenging faces of the two men flashed before me; and then I saw the bloated sailor creeping by the shoulder of the downs in the dusk, and that restless figure in the carriage, with the shock head and sallow face, flicking a whip at the hedge. I wondered, and my wonder deepened into something else, something that was near illumination. Mrs. Lovell's melancholy voice broke on my thoughts. "It would have been such a good thing for her. We have always known what it was to want. Dear Sylvia only last month was obliged to sell some of her jewellery. I've stood it as long as I could; but the house is expensive, Mr. Kerslake, and

hard to let out in this lonely place. It isn't as if it was near the sea. And Sylvia liked him so much."

I saw that, had I wished it, nay even if I had wished it not, the whole story would have been forced into my ears. She was unstrung, she wanted sympathy, and I believe she was vaguely in her own mind offering excuses for herself. She had brought about this match with a wealthy stranger precipitately, and her daughter "liked him so much." She had done it for both their sakes, but I really believe she thought it was more on account of her daughter.

"It is so hard on a girl," she explained wearily, "to have no future, no prospect and to be stinted in youth—to lack everything."

So it is; but the present case of Sylvia Lovell seemed to be even harder, if all was true. Alston entered as abruptly as he had left.

"That hired girl is about scared to death," he said grimly, "I believe she thinks I'm worse than the marauders. However, I've got most of what I want out of her. You'll see me through this night, Mr. Kerslake?" I nodded. "That's right. Now, we've got no time to lose. Let's get aboard your carriage."

I was ignorant of many things I should like to have known, but I accepted marching orders without a word, and leaving Mrs. Lovell mistress



"Aiston stood looking down on the hysterical woman, with  
pre-occupation and indifference in his eye"



of herself once more, we set out. She appeared to rest absolutely on Alston, and to take his ultimate success as a matter of course.

"You will bring her back to me at once, won't you?" she pleaded, and he nodded, with a little smile.

"Don't you worry any," he advised her. "This is my funeral."

It was an odd phrase at that moment, and contrasted in my mind with the marriage which he had anticipated on the morrow. But that night Alston shed every sign and symptom of the sensitiveness with which he usually impressed one. And that was the first time I saw him comparatively undraped, but not the last, as you shall hear.

"I can't stick an hysterical woman," he remarked, as we bowled along through the night towards Sandown, and thus dismissed poor Mrs. Lovell. "Say, there's one thing you ought to know, Kerslake, and that's this. You've been good and asked no questions, and made no bother, and handled the sponge and so forth. But I've run up against a snag just here, and if you were sharp as a needle you couldn't put a name on it."

"I think I could," said I. "Rudgwick!"

He whistled. "How did you get round there?" he asked.

"I just put two and two together," I said.

In the darkness I felt he was examining me carefully, and added: "Mrs. Lovell said you declared it to be the work of an enemy, and I knew you were at loggerheads with Rudgwick. Besides I saw two of his men up here."

"You did?" he asked in some excitement.  
"Tell."

"I encountered a sailor from the yacht as I drove up and there was another yacht hand waiting in a carriage within a hundred yards of the house."

"Now, why in the blazes didn't you say that before?" he cried almost roughly.

"What bearing had that knowledge on Miss Lovell's disappearance until I had the clue from Mrs. Lovell?" I asked.

"True," he assented. "You couldn't suspect. No. Well, anyway, you're right. This is Rudgwick's hand, and I know it. I had more than a fear when I heard about that telegram. That was to get Mrs. Lovell out of the way. The hired girl was negligible. Two men met her at the door, says she, and locked her in a room where we found her. She might have screamed there till daylight without being heard in this solitude. Then there was the carriage you saw. Oh, yes, Rudgwick managed it like clockwork. He's good at machinery, keeps it in good oiled working

order. He didn't reckon on any hitch. But as it chanced I caught an earlier train."

"Have you any guess where they will be gone?" I asked.

"They didn't go Brading way, or we should have met them; and I doubt if they went to Bembridge. We'll have a look at the lane and the wheel-marks when we get to the cross-roads. My idea is Rudgwick's got his yacht off Sandown. That would be nearest."

"I should like to know what on earth his object could be in kidnapping a young lady of whom he knows nothing, and what he looks for out of the outrage."

"Since you're in this tonight with me, you've got a right to know," said Alston deliberately. "And I'm going to tell you right away. It's not the first time we've run up against each other, Wilson Rudgwick and I. Maybe it won't be the last. But this occasion's the biggest. This Montana deal has gone against him badly, and he knows it for all his show of indifference. It's got between the joints of his armour, and he feels pretty bad. Last thing he did was to make me an offer yesterday. I don't say that in its way it wasn't a liberal sort of offer. But as it happens I hold the cards, and I'm not going about Wall Street for the sake of philanthropy. So I declined his generous terms, and he's laid for me another way."

"But Miss Lovell—" I said, and then jumped at what he was hinting. "You mean she's a hostage?"

"Precisely," he assented. "Sylvia won't come by any harm; it's me that's meant to suffer."

"But it is monstrous," I protested. "People don't do these things."

"Don't they?" he retorted quite complacently. "Paul Jones wasn't much of a pirate compared with Wilson Rudgwick when he's on the loose end of a business deal. He wants me to give terms; but I will see him and hear him sizzling on the gridiron below before I call a truce. He's run up against something harder than a brick wall this time."

This broke from him with a certain grossness of accent, and yet with a forcefulness which could not but impress one. Out of the sweet and sleek the strong seemed that night to have emerged. I had an increased respect for Herbert Fordyce Alston but I do not know that my fancy for him was augmented.

At the cross-roads we pulled up, and with the aid of matches made an examination of the road. The marks were unintelligible to me, but my companion seemed satisfied with his inspection. He announced that Sandown was our destination, and we resumed our journey which was now down hill in silence, and at an accelerated pace. I was

occupied by my own thoughts which were miscellaneous and curiously mixed, while on his part I have no doubt Alston was similarly engaged. After all he had lost a bride, though at present I was inclined to underestimate the situation. I could not bring myself to regard the incident as so serious as it seemed to him, for all his outward coolness. Things did not happen that way, at least in England, and bluff (I flattered myself) did not "go down" in my country, as possibly it did in America. I was in fact a little conventional in my outlook, as I see now, not realising the formidable possibilities of human life and human nature under unusual stress. Well, I was to be enlightened later.

It was quite dark by the time we reached Sandown, and our horse was more than a little blown. However he was destined to enjoy a rest, for our enquiries took up some time. At length we found a coastguardsman who told us what we wanted and Alston threw up the sponge. That is, he acknowledged his defeat in the first round. The black-hulled schooner had been off shore most of the afternoon, and our informant had descried her setting sail an hour since. "She's heading down channel," he concluded.

Alston was quite quiet. He made no comment on the information, but thanked the man and turned about.

"That's first blood to Wilson," said he cheerfully. "Now if you'll act bottle-holder, my dear Sir, you'll witness a pretty bout. I've not had a spar for some time and I'll take off my coat to this." He whistled a stave of a popular tune, but his brow was contracted in thought. We walked up towards the hotel where we had left the carriage, and as we entered the yard a boy emerged from the darkness and accosted us.

"Name o' Alston?" he inquired in an official voice.

"That's so," said my companion, scrutinising him.

Without a word the boy put a letter in his hands and walked away. A light from the yard lamp fell on it.

"Rudgwick, Great Scott!" ejaculated Alston, and broke the seal.

I did not wait; the boy was slipping into the night; and I followed him. He turned into the dark street and went along at a good pace, clearly reckless of pursuit. The urchin was innocent enough of his mission, but he had been used as an unconscious pawn on one side, and he might be useful in the same way on the other. I kept him in sight down the street to the door of the big hotel. He wore no postal badge or dress, and hence he must be a private messenger. I entered the hotel after him, and he passed along the

corridors into the billiard room. In the door was a little glass plate inserted so as to give a view of the nearest table from without, and so avoid the risk of spoiling a stroke by rough or hasty entrance I glanced through it, and saw the boy cross the room to a divan on which some men were seated. One of them was the man with tumbled iron-grey hair I had seen first on the yacht, and then in the carriage by Bessenton. I wanted to see no more for the present. Indeed I was curious to learn what communication Rudgwick had made, but I had to discover one thing ere I left.

I stopped at the inquiry office, and put some questions. I found that there was no chance of getting to London that night, and secondly I got the hour of the departure of the earliest train and boat from Ryde. I was on the point of leaving when an idea struck me, and I paused.

- “By the way could you tell me if an American gentleman named Mr. Wilson Rudgwick is staying here?”

The clerk considered, and shook his head. “No Sir—no one of that name.”

“Are you sure?” I asked. “I understood for certain he was to be here. It’s most disappointing. Are you quite certain? An American gentleman?”

The clerk turned over the leaves of his book. “There’s only one American gentleman here,” he said. “Mr. Nathaniel Butterfield.” I shook my

head. "Arrived to-day," he added. I shook my head again, thanked him, and went out. I thought I had found my sallow friend's name.

Alston was awaiting me when I reached the stables, but he did not offer to show me the letter. He was showing a little more irritation than he confessed to, and his previous attitude would have advertised. In fact I inferred that he was suppressing a good deal of his feelings by an effort.

"I got Wilson's back kick," he remarked in a tone that struggled gallantly to be philosophical. "He sends his compliments. Well the laugh's on me now. Let him enjoy the performance. I don't mind. This comedy's going to run a considerable time, and the first act's not the most important. I guess the racket comes in the third, don't it?"

It was a way of talking, but I could not help reflecting that his mind seemed to be more concerned with the defeat of Rudgwick than with the loss of his lady-love.

"Does he confess to his outrage?" I asked.

"Well, he says Q. E. F. and that's the same thing. He quotes a bit of poetry. It's the only piece Wilson ever knew or heard of. I reckon he'll have to learn the 'Elegy in a Country Churchyard' when I've done with him."

He laughed as he mounted into the carriage, but I was silent. Somehow I did not tell him of

my discovery, and I spoke very little all the way back to the manorhouse; while Alston on the contrary talked a good deal, and talked, I could not help thinking, with a touch of swagger. But swagger is justified always by the qualities behind it, and Alston impressed me with a sense of his personality.

It was arranged that I should stay the night at the manorhouse, for I was now fully committed to the quest; and though I said nothing of it I was the less disinclined to join Alston through feeling that inadvertently I had provided Rudgwick with the information which enabled him to carry out his plot. I was in that sense an unconscious party to the abduction; since it was arranged to happen during Alston's absence. Moreover, I had communicated the news of the impending marriage which had probably stirred him to sudden action. It was preposterous that a bride should thus be held to ransom, as it were, but there was no other interpretation of the seizure possible. Alston was anxious that I should help him, as I could see from his return from the stark nakedness of primitive passions and his visions of revenge to his affable and polished manner. And he was sensibly affected when I consented.

"I'll see you through if I can," I said. "But of course if you get the police on—"

"No; that doesn't go," said he thoughtfully.

"Rudgwick's cleared out somewhere, and he and I'll settle this deal ourselves. We don't want to advertise our quarrel, nor for the matter of that bring Miss Lovell's name into it. Not but what," he added with a smile, "it would be a clean scoop for a newspaper. Our reporters out there would give their heads for five columns of this stuff. It would make a fine story, eh?"

"Then," said I, "what do you propose?"

"I want a boat," said he quickly, "and I want a crew, and that's why I want you, lieutenant." I reflected. "There's plenty of money," he added significantly.

I nodded. "That was not in my mind. It seems to me you're asking for a pursuit. You want the *Mermaid* followed and brought up?"

"I do," said he, helping himself to a finger of whiskey; for this conversation took place in the manorhouse, after Mrs. Lovell had retired, grief-stricken and bewildered to her room.

"Then what do you expect?" I inquired. "Mind you, I'm prepared to go with you, but I want the ground cleared now."

"You're right, Mr. Kerslake," said he. "I should prefer it cleared, and I'm going to clear it. I want a boat and crew for emergencies that may arise—any emergencies, see?"

I thought I saw, and I thought I knew my crew and my boat.

"You'll fight to a finish?" I asked, "rather than call in authorities?"

"Who in the devil can I call in? Where is Rudgwick?" he demanded. "As far as I know there's no sea-police. Let's suppose Wilson has a fancy for Java or the Canaries. Who's to stop him? Why me, and me only. I can't ask His Britannic Majesty's cruiser to start out, can I?"

"There are processes—" I began.

"Now, see here, Kerslake," he interrupted. "I want to work this off on my own, partly for reasons I've given you, and partly because I believe I can manage it with greater facility—and celerity. I'm not afraid of being beat if you'll fulfil your part of the bargain."

"Very well," said I. "I understand. You shall have ship and crew by to-morrow evening."

"Good man!" said he pleasantly, "and now have another whiskey."

I refused, but accepted a cigar, and he took one himself. There were no matches in the room, and after a futile hunt for a box in his pockets he produced from them a slip of paper and twisted it into a spill. This he lit at the lamp and so got a light for my cigar and his, subsequently knocking out the flame on his boot.

"By the way," said I at that moment, "do you know anyone called Nathaniel Butterfield?"

I asked on the impulse, though I had not told

him my story, of the messenger boy, and he looked up at me suddenly with interrogating eyes.

"Why so?" he asked.

"Because I think he's a man employed by Rudgwick," I answered.

"You're right," he replied. "He's Wilson's confidential man; he's Wilson's secretary. He knows more about Wilson than any other score of men put together."

That was satisfactory; for if I had my hands on Butterfield, perhaps I should be able to put my hands on Rudgwick also. I smiled to myself, but I said nothing. It was my secret, to be revealed in the fullness of time, and I would keep it as a surprise.

In that June season the night was shrunk to its smallest dimensions, so as to have become but a transitory patch of darkness occluded between twilight and dawn. The punctual sun called me through the open window from which the curtains had lapsed, and I rose in the dews of the morning and looked forth across the lawn. The house was silent about me, but the garden was in full song, and magical with music. Ever so many voices mingled in that choir. I heard under all the low cadences of the blackbird, and through them the song-thrush facile and melodious, the jocund flow of the wren, the chaffinch at his matins and the delicate lute of the willow-warbler. The symphony echoed from the walls of my room em-

phasising thus the deathly stillness of the house. At the foot of the lawn the garden-plots began, and beyond the sun twinkled like gold on the young green of early summer. It was a morning to breathe romance into one; and of a sudden I took fire out of the freshness and the glory of it. Within my heart was a swift insurgence of feeling, and I thrilled with the commotion of it from head to foot. I knew now. My eyes were opened precipitately. It had come upon me in a tide as I stood at the window. It was not idle curiosity that had kept me in the Island and about those scenes, when I should have been in London; nor was it mere human compassion for someone who had seemed unhappy. No; the solution was simpler than either of these explanations. Sylvia Lovell herself explained it. I loved her.

As I stood there I could in my mind's eye see her upon the lawn dabbled with those early dews, sweet as roses and bright with beauty. She had a natural gaiety, revealed in the open generosity of her fine eyes, but that had suffered eclipse during the strange operations of the last few days. But I had a picture of her blossoming under the warmth of happiness into that lovely smiling flower she represented to me. But the rub was there. She had been wantonly abducted as a pawn in the game two speculators were playing. It was monstrous; it was unutterable; and my

heart flooded with fury. She did not love this man, but he was evidently genuinely attached to her. Why else should he have engaged himself to a penniless girl? It was her wonderful beauty to which the cool business-like American had fallen a victim. But she was not for him. She did not love him. She was a child in spirit and all but years, and it was I that should teach her what life meant. That exquisite bud should open to me and for me. I descended into the dark house and opened the French windows that gave on the lawn. The light streamed into the room, dazzlingly. I walked forth. How oddly composed was this man Alston, that he could contain himself so wonderfully in the midst of his bereavement. But then he knew his enemy. And yet it was not so that I could have loved and shown my love. I would not have sat and smoked my cigar with the knowledge that my love was prisoner going out with the tide for an unknown destination. As I thought on it now, I grew infuriate.

I could conceive her now newly risen crossing the lawn to meet me, who had watched under her windows and called her forth with my voice. She advanced smiling, that flower of youth, that opening bud. The glory of the morning sang in my ears with the voices of the birds. Morning Glory! Sylvia was my morning glory. She would abide with me.

At the bottom of the lawn a pretty little pergola was covered with clusters of noisette roses, and honeysuckle, and I plucked a nosegay. Had it not been tended by Sylvia's hands? I set it in my buttonhole, and as I did so my eye was caught by something. It was but a trifle, but I think I was inordinately excited, and so supremely alive to ideas and impressions. My brain worked like an engine running free, and my heart beat in a tumult. At the foot of the pillars of the pergola were thin and climbing tendrils. They had put up from the earth a few inches, almost as if they had grown overnight, or sprung up in that dewy dawn. They were the first shoots of the convolvulus-woodbine, they call it; but to me it is always Morning Glory. There was to my mind something prophetic, something encouraging in that coincidence. The Morning Glory had grown in the night. It reminded me of those wonderful fairy tales in which the blood or body of the unhappy princess springs in an hour into flower, and thus keeps watch and ward. My princess was not dead, but she was gone, and here was her flower just dawning. When the bloom of the Morning Glory opened that flower of mine would open to me. I vowed on the lawn and amid the love-songs of the birds that she should.

When I reached the house silence still held it, and I looked round the room, which displayed all

the signs of discomfort characteristic of an unswept chamber in the morning. It was discovered by the sun in its undress, and seemed to wince and be ashamed. In the fire-place were the ashes of cigars, and the half burned matches. A twisted piece of paper caught my attention, and, almost with an instinct for tidiness, I stooped and picked it up. I was full of my thoughts that went straying far into the future as I did so, and I was not aware that I was smoothing out the spill. When I discovered the fact I realised that it was the message from Rudgwick which Alston had thrown charred into the grate. It was only brief, and half was consumed, but my eye gathered an impression of it instantaneously. The hand was big and sprawling. The fragment ran—

*Reckon I caught you napping, Fordyce.....  
haven't broke the ring. We staked it out.....  
observe.....the pegs same as me.....  
If you can get home on me I'm not complaining....*

Well, it was no longer Alston he had to face, this confident millionaire; he had to deal with me, and if Alston did not "get home," I was in that hour of exultation confident that Willoughby Kerslake would. And as for his ring that had nothing to do with me; for, thank Heaven, I was neither a pork-packer nor a speculator in Montana mines.

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## CHAPTER VI

### THE CHASE

I LEFT the manorhouse before Alston was up, and was amazed that he took his sleep so securely. His nature was as yet beyond my comprehension; it comprised so many incongruous elements. I gave the frightened and inquisitive maid a note for him, to the effect that I had gone to engage a yacht and a crew; but really I had other fish to fry. I made at once for Sandown, reaching that town by breakfast time, and I chose an hotel for my meal other than that which harboured Mr. Nathaniel Butterfield. I need not say that I was not long delayed by my appetite, and immediately went to the station, taking up in the waiting-room a position of vantage. If Butterfield was to rejoin his chief, I was assured it would be through some other port of departure than Sandown. It was unlikely that he would use a yacht to follow up the *Mermaid*; and the chances were all in favour of his meeting the party at some point of call. Hence I waited, if with some misgivings, in my lair.

My assumption was justified by events, for it needed but five minutes to the departure of the

train when I recognised the man walking briskly up the platform. He carried a small handbag, and whistled as he went, seemingly well pleased with himself. I watched him into a first class carriage, and then myself got into the next compartment, so as to keep him well under my nose. At Ryde he embarked on the boat with the same airy indifference and, so far as I could see, never had a suspicion that he was followed. He read a paper with absorption in the carriage of the London train until it started, and again I managed to enter by the next door without being perceived, after I had sent an urgent telegram to a marine dealer of my acquaintance at Southsea. Presently we were aboard together en route for London.

At Waterloo station I ducked successfully into the crowd on the platform and thus evaded notice, keeping all the while my quarry within eyeshot. There was no reason in the world why he should suppose he was followed, and consequently his movements were overt and unsuspicious, and I went in his wake to a restaurant in the Strand, where I established myself at a table not very far away. I had a view of his face in profile as he ate and read a newspaper, and now I examined it with some care. It was heavy-browed, thickly lined and pallid, and it was almost out of drawing about a knob of a nose. His shock of greying hair came across his fore-

head, and his small eyes peeped sharply from under eyebrows that hardly existed. He had the air of a man ready and expectant, and darted glances swiftly at people who came and went. Apparently he decided instantaneously concerning them, for his eyes invariably came back to his paper. But it gave me the impression of a certain inquisitive and alert habit of mind. His actions too were alert and almost unexpected; for suddenly he called the waiter, paid his bill and rose, as if he had remembered an appointment. He came sharply down between the tables, and his eye encountered mine.

There was recognition in his face, and I took my decision at once. I stared hard, rose, and advanced a step. He came to a pause.

"I think"—I began tentatively fluttering and civil. "Don't I know your face? I'm sure—"

He grinned. "I saw you aboard a yacht the other day," said he. "But I guess you don't know me. It was Mr. Wilson Rudgwick's boat."

He knew nothing then, he suspected nothing. My ruse of half-remembering him would have laid any doubts if he had had them.

"I'm sorry," said I apologising. "But your face seemed somehow familiar. I suppose it isn't a face one forgets. How is Mr. Rudgwick?"

He sat down in an empty chair, and now I saw that his eyes were pleasant in their smile.

"He's just all right," he answered. "I reckon he's going to enjoy himself over here."

"We're rapidly becoming your playground," I said.

"Well, this London's grand, real grand, though it's a bit behind the times. Those omnibuses now, running outside,—I like 'em, but then I don't do business here. I guess they stand for London all through. I like London—for pleasure."

"Making a long stay?" I queried.

He looked down his nose, "Leaving to-day—returning to-morrow, so to speak. I'll hang on to London when I can, while I can."

"I hope you'll enjoy yourself," said I. He was evidently not communicative, and my tone marked the end of civil exchanges. He got up, and with a somewhat formal but rapid salutation left me. Now that he had recognised me it was impossible that I should allow him to do so again. I hurriedly paid my bill and hastened into the street. My man was getting into a cab, and I called another.

"Follow that cab," I said, "and find out where that gentleman goes. If you bring me precise and exact information it's a guinea for you. I'll be here."

He whipped up and drove off into the whirlpool of the Strand almost ere I had done speaking,

and I returned into the restaurant and sat down near the door, keeping an eye on the brilliant street. The cabman pulled up before the door a little over an hour later, and we were soon in colloquy. He was a businesslike fellow.

"Followed the gent, Sir, to a barber's shop, where he keeps his cab waiting. Then he was off to a perfumer's where he stopped a bit. Then he drove off to Waterloo and landed."

"And then you lost him?" said I.

"Beggin' your pardon, no, Sir," said the driver with triumph. "I just put the cab on the rank in the 'ands of a friend o' mine, and run in after 'im. I follered 'im to the bookin' office—second platform, and run agen' 'im, so to speak. He took a ticket for Marlow."

"Marlow!" I echoed. Marlow! What did my American friend want on the river? Besides Marlow was reached from Paddington not Waterloo? Was it—stay, Marlow! surely—I had a flash of inspiration. *St. Malo!*

Southampton was the point of departure for the little French port.

I gave the cabman his guinea, and jumped into his cab. "Waterloo," said I.

I caught the next train back to Portsmouth, interviewed my marine dealer, and before I had reached Bessenton Manor that evening I had engaged boat and men to man her.

Alston met me with some impatience in his manner, as if he were of the opinion that I had been unduly dawdling, but he was vastly too polite a man to break out in speech.

"Say, Mr. Kerslake," was his remark. "When do you reckon we can be getting?"

I pulled out my watch and glanced at it. "The boat I have engaged and commissioned will be off Bembridge at nine o'clock to-night. I was going to suggest that we should drive there at once. We shall meet her coming in."

"Bully!" said he, "you're a smart man," and turned at once to give his instructions.

He took command of the hopeless house naturally and without bustle. Mrs. Lovell under the pressure of his quiet influence regained composure and almost confidence. She leaned on him again as she had grown to do in the past fortnight. But I do not think either of us paid her much attention beyond ceremonious politeness. Our object was to get off, and I breathed more freely when this was accomplished; and as we bowled along by the shoulder of the downs, on which I had first seen Sylvia Lovell, Alston surprised me by emerging from the authoritative air which had surrounded him so far, and saying to me mildly,

"And now, Kerslake, I've got time to listen.

What's your news? You know something. Get ahead."

"How do you guess that?" I asked.

"Oh, well," says he, lighting a cigar. "I've played poker, and I'm a speculator. I'm nothing if not a gambler, and it's my business to read faces. If I can't get hold of the ledger I try my hand with the blotting-paper."

"You're right," said I. "Rudgwick's in France, and we're trimming our sails for St. Malo."

"Huh!" said he, and was silent a minute; and then, "Perhaps you'll be good enough to empty the basket."

And then I told him of Butterfield, and of my recognition at Sandown, and of my pursuit in London. He squeezed my arm in a large and friendly grasp.

"They told me the British Navy was the smartest institution over here," said he, "and by the Day of Judgment I begin to believe it. That was pretty cute of you, and you can hold your tongue."

I felt he was inspecting me thoughtfully in the twilight.

"Now the first time I got a real notion of you," he went on, "was when you tripped up that man of Rudgwick's. I fastened on to you then as a good man. It was neat and smart and imaginative. There are no flies on you, Mr. Kerslake."

I told him I felt complimented, but I had not given him all my news, nor did I intend to do so just then.

The boat was lying in the roads when we got to Bembridge, and we went aboard without delay. She was yawl-rigged, and of fifty tons burden, and carried a crew of six hands, excluding her master, McCulloch. I had him on the best recommendation, as a thorough sailor, which he gave evidence of being from the outset. He had reached Bembridge inside his time, and the boat was as clean and smart as a man o' war. She had too a capable air, which McCulloch bore out from his account of her.

"She slipped across," he said. "She'll go down the Channel with greased heels to-night."

"Good," said Alston. "Excellent, Mr. McCulloch. And if you're agreeable we'll go right away."

"Oh, I'm all right," said the skipper bluffly. "We're fit for a fortnight's cruise, if you want it;" and then when Alston was gone he turned to me. "I want to know where I stand, Mr. Kerslake. Am I to take orders from this gentleman, same as from you?"

A bluff blond-bearded man of five and thirty he confronted me with eyes in which nothing but cold constancy was legible.

"Oh yes, said I. We're partners."

"That's all right," he declared, and dismissed the subject promptly and decisively.

For that was what I had kept from Alston. I was not joining this expedition to rescue a wife for him, as he should know all in good time, though it would be a fair field and no favour between us. And so the yawl was not his affair, but mine, though I was content that he should unite forces with me in our first and common object—to save Sylvia Lovell from this monstrous trans-Atlantic abduction.

And when we had set sail, Alston returned on deck to find me communing with myself on this point. A short, blue-eyed sailor had the wheel and on the topsail behind him was a lifebuoy, with the name of the yawl—"Esperance."

The colour was new and Alston's eyes fastened on it.

"Say, we've a scunner of a name here, Kerslake," he said. "We got to live up to this."

"Yes," I assented. Had I dared I would have styled her Sylvia, but no, there was in her present name some special and private meaning for me alone. It was my yacht, and she carried my secret in her name.

We footed it down the Channel very easily, the yawl dancing on a broken sea, with a little wind from the south; and as the stars came out

in a clear sky a sense of expectancy and romance grew in my heart.

"Butterfield," said Alston, who had been silent for some time, "would get to St. Malo to-night."

"He's probably there now," said I.

"Where does that bring us in?" he asked.

"The Lord knows," I answered shortly. "We've discovered his base—that's all. We'll give him a run."

He was silent a moment, and then lit a cigar which glowed in the darkness. "This is an interesting country of yours," said he with what seemed to me irrelevance. "It's full of contradictions. Now over with us, what you call your gentlemen are the only folk with manners; while here seems to me all the gentlemen are the only folk without 'em."

"Yes, we've rubbed off all the polish by this twentieth century," I replied with some amusement at his naiveté of address. "But you see frankness has its advantages over ceremoniousness."

"Well, yes." He did not see my counter, or at least did not appear to see it. "I reckon there's a time for bluntness, and bluntness and sharpness are the same thing oddly enough."

"We're too pressed for time to be polite," I said.

"We're generally considered to be more in a hurry than you, yet we manage it," he retorted.

I laughed. "I yield," I said. "But I don't always know what that politeness means, and after all it may cover something." He threw me a look. "It may mask a battery."

"Oh, yes," he agreed amiably. "That's in the game, and now, Mr. Kerslake, its time we talked business. What about this yawl?"

"You mean the terms?" I asked, for I was expecting this.

"Yes. I suppose the sum is tidy?"

"The terms are fair," I replied after a pause, and I told him what they were.

He nodded. "I don't mind that. That's all right. Well, if you'll tell me what you're out of pocket by this and fixing things up, I'll draw you a cheque. And I'll stand handsomely indebted to you all the same."

"There are no expenses," I said. "Pay at the end. We've got her for a fortnight, which can be extended, and we pay hands—that's all at present."

"It's not my notion of business," he commented. "But if your people are content to do it that way, why I won't raise any objections, and I'm still your humble servant, Mr. Kerslake."

"Oh, I like sport," I said awkwardly, "and

I've never chased a slaver before. It's putting back the clock."

"Yes, it has an antique look," he agreed. "Anyway, you oblige me greatly, and if we can come up with Rudgwick I'll be up to my neck in gratitude."

"Supposing," said I, "that we do find him, what is your plan of campaign?" That was a point which had never been discussed between us in the bustle of our departure. But of course it must be determined. His cigar was a circle of red fire before me in the night.

"Well," he said with unusual deliberation, "I've got a notion."

"Legal operations?" I inquired.

Again he was deliberate. "I don't fancy so. You see, it would take time to move the machinery in France, and maybe Wilson would have skipped. But I've a notion and I'm working it out."

"There's only the one alternative," I remarked, "unless Rudgwick surrenders at discretion."

"He won't do that," said Alston. "Wilson won't do that. He's in for a fight, and he rather likes a fight. He's been fighting all his life, and now he's on top he'll keep on fighting out of mere habit."

"Then," said I, "this looks like a conflict."

"You may put it at that," replied Alston complacently. "It's a real campaign, and I guess

there's going to be real fighting. But I haven't settled the details. I've a notion, and that's all."

Was he speaking metaphorically? Or did he refer to actual war? I did not know, nor did I in that hour of exaltation greatly care. I was in for an adventure and one highly seasoned with romance. And so the *Esperance* travelled pleasantly through the night for Cherbourg.

We reached the port early in the morning and arrived by train at St. Malo some hours later and at once set inquiries on foot. But we could hear of no yacht in the neighborhood, and so we came to the conclusion that Butterfield must have designed to pick up the *Mermaid* at another point. It was just possible, but not likely, that he was in the town awaiting the arrival of the yacht, but that would reveal confidence in his position which Rudwick would not be justified in assuming. We talked the situation over.

"Well," said Alston with his friendly smile. "Lost the trail? You didn't hear enough in London. That cabman of yours should have gone down with Butterfield."

This, as I had gathered, was his inveterate habit, to throw the onus amiably on another's shoulders, mitigating this investment with responsibility by his smile. I did not refuse the responsibility. He moved too largely for me, and I was not at all certain I knew him. I was there

merely to play the part of head-clerk (unpaid) to a business man.

"In a small place like this we can pick up the trail," I said. "He does not know he is being followed. He would move openly. There's the railway station."

He nodded. "We'll try it."

Well, we had no difficulty at the station; indeed our course had been barely interrupted since we sailed. When I looked back on it it seemed to me astonishing how success had attended our efforts, ever since I had dropped eyes on Nathaniel Butterfield in Sandown. The man with greying hair and a knob nose was identified without difficulty by the officials of the railway. He had arrived the night before and taken a ticket to Tretang. Monsieur would no doubt find his friend there.

Yes, Messieurs would make the attempt at all events. We had left the yawl in McCulloch's hands at Cherbourg to await orders, and now we struck inland. At Tretang in Morbihan if we did not find Butterfield we hoped to hit on his trail again with as little trouble as we had at the port. Alston had shipped his motor cycle, which was a tri-car with a second seat, on the yawl, and now with businesslike prudence entrained it, and thus we reached Tretang in the evening of a bright warm day.

The principal inn of the village drew us at once, for if Butterfield had arrived late at night, as seemed probable, he would have taken shelter under that friendly roof. Here again our reasoning was instantaneously justified. A man answering to his description of Butterfield had lain there the night before and gone on in the morning. How had he gone? We were getting "warm," in the language of the child's game. Why, Monsieur had taken a carriage, Jean Bretoi's carriage. We too then must take a carriage. But stay, there was Alston's tri-car. Butterfield had driven along the Quiberon road, which thus made connection with the open sea. We began to understand now, or thought we did. The *Mermaid* was or would be off the Morbihan coast, by Belle Isle or thereby, and there was to await Rudgwick's emissary. The tri-car saved us from the tedium of a country cart and we were presently bound for the coast which was not more than twenty-five miles distant. Our way lay through open and broken country most characteristic of that part of Brittany and for some time we took the air of moorlands. But presently we passed down into flatter country, grown with pines here and there and apparently more cultivated towards the seaboard. By this time it was growing dusk, and the Atlantic was murk on the horizon, and when we entered the

village of Tellezac on the shore the day was done. Our chase was necessarily ended for that night, yet not our investigation. The inn was comfortable and old; and we settled down to a supper very appetising after our efforts all through that day and the previous night. But Alston, now that he was so near and yet so far, was restless, which he showed not so much outwardly as by his abrupt change of topic. He visited the inn-keeper more than once and I knew had been interrogating him. At last he came back more satisfied.

"It's all right. I believe we're on the scent, Kerslake. A man who looks like being Butterfield passed along here to-day, but he don't know where he went—to Quiberon or south. We've got to hunt that out. Say, I think I'll go and send a wire through to McCulloch to bring her along this way. Seems as if we've found our circus at last."

Well, we had found it more certainly than we knew, as I was to discover there and then; for he was not gone more than five minutes when Wilson Rudgwick walked into the room.

"Why," said he after a stare, "It's Lieutenant Kerslake isn't it? This is riotous. What brings you here, and what'll you take, Sir?"

The appearance of the kidnapper, cool, airy, dark of visage and bluntly hospitable, took me

aback. Of a sudden I realised the proximity of Sylvia Lovell. If the man were here, she could not be far away; and I throbbed at the thought. But I had myself in complete control, for a life of discipline has that advantage at least. I expressed equal surprise to see him.

"This is a mighty small world, isn't it?" he observed, drinking his glass of wine he had ordered. "If this wasn't an all-fired hot day, I couldn't load up with this swill." He made a sour face at the bottle. "But my throat's dusty and sandy. I've been coming along the seaboard. My yacht's off there along. What's yours? Whiskey?"

I told him, glibly lying, that I was on a brief tour to a sister who had a house at Quimper.

"Ah!" said he. "Corkscrewing round to it, eh. Well, it's nice weather and sun for it, but I'm for sea again. It's too dry on land, and I'm dried enough in Chicago."

Now while he was speaking I was on pins and needles lest Alston should return and blunder in on his enemy. I felt that he ought to be warned, and yet I did not know how this was to be accomplished.

Suddenly an idea struck me. I had a notebook in my pocket and I took it out, and began to scribble in it. A sharp glance from Rudgwick told me that the imperturbable American had

marked my action, and I explained amiably, as I yawned.

"I always write up my diary before going to bed."

"Ah!" said he. "I don't keep 'em. Ledgers and daybooks are enough for me."

"I only record my holidays," I added. "Yet a diary has its advantages."

"I take it you don't spread yourself in the style of the young ladies," he said with a smile. "Confidences and raptures and speculations don't go with the twentieth century."

"No," I laughed back at him, folded my note surreptitiously and rose. I wanted to warn Alston, but I did not want to lose sight of Rudgwick. I rang the bell and the innkeeper appeared.

"*L'addition!*" said I. He bowed and withdrew. "Not staying here?" said Rudgwick. "Rather late for a start, isn't it?"

"I'm on a motor-cycle," I explained, "and I'm bound to hurry up to Quimper."

The innkeeper returned with my bill, which I paid, and at the same time I slipped into his hand the note I had written, which was inscribed "*Pour Monsieur mon ami.*"

The man's bow, I felt, included his acknowledgment of the message, and he went out. Rudgwick rose.

"I'll follow your example," he said, "if my yacht's come up as she should. I'll just have a look."

When he was gone I made my preparations to start, but I did not intend to go very far. Rudgwick re-entered.

"There's no sign of her," he remarked evenly, "so I guess I'm fixed here to-night. You're not in a hurry, Mr. Kerslake?"

I hesitated. Of course I was not in a hurry, for I had now found what I had been running down for the last four and twenty hours. But I made a feint of doubt.

"I ought to start shortly," I said.

"There's a moon, ain't there?" he inquired. "Come, sit down again, and let us have a drink. I'd like your advice on that point. I don't know much about France; I don't travel much. But I will be damned if I drink any more of that wine."

"Cognac," I suggested.

"That smiles better," he assented; and we ordered cognac with our coffee.

It was an hour before I left him, and I must do that only because of my pre-engagement with Alston. I knew by his absence that he had received my letter, and if so he would have followed my instructions. And so I got up, shook hands with my companion cordially, and departed.

*Rudgwick here. Meet me on Quimper road at the first inn or two miles, whichever nearest.*

That had been my communication, and as I went out of the tavern I made a few inquiries of the landlord. There was an inn a mile and a half along the road, a wayside *auberge*. Alston would be waiting there.

I got into the tri-car, and started off at a fair pace. It was now quite dark, for the night was moonless, and my lamp scattered the road with thicker shadows. They lay in ambush on both sides and all around me, investing that single patch of bright light just before me, and by contrast all the blacker for it. The car thumped and beat along, and the lights of the village faded. My thoughts flew forward to Alston. What plan had he in his head? Now that we had our hands on the enemy, what was his design? I wanted to learn it, and he had had an hour or more to elaborate it; but I was by no means sure that it would be my plan. Rudgwick was at the inn, and we could go back and seize him. One abduction justified another, indeed was the proper ironic rejoinder. Rudgwick sleeping comfortably in his four-post bed, or Rudgwick at his farewell cigar, or Rudgwick again, newly risen and complacent in the breezy dawn—there was our quarry unsuspecting and ready to our gun. And, Rudgwick once in bondage, we had the whip hand of

the party, which it was not likely contained any-one willing or able to carry out his scheme, whatever that might be. In loyalty to Alston I was on my way to a conference with him, but I had no doubt as to the best and wisest course. And then my thoughts reverted to Sylvia Lovell, and my eyes unconsciously went seawards, where the water of the Bay lay wrapped in night. I could conceive half a dozen ways now by which she was to be reclaimed, for my brain worked quickly as I flew through the soft night air. I was affected unaccountably more than I had anticipated by the thought of seeing her again, but Alston, good-humoured, large, persuasive and capable, suddenly loomed in the background, a shadow on the sunshine. When Sylvia was safe there was Alston to face. It was ridiculous to suppose that she would necessarily have any preference for me over him, but all that I wanted then was that she should not be driven by circumstances and maternal folly or selfishness into this marriage. Afterwards——

Across the flashlight of the acetylene lamp leapt a shadow; there was a crack, a whirr in my head, a sense of falling; and I knew no more.

## CHAPTER VII

### THE FACTOTUM

I HAD a vague consciousness of voices about me, also of a jogging which gave me pain, but I remained for long under the envelope of stupor, and when I did fully awake to life all was new to me. I was in a room sparsely furnished, with big cold walls of stone, on one of which, as I stared at it weakly in the candle light, was a faded fresco of very ancient date.

But my eyes soon passed to the human inhabitant of that chamber, who, hearing, I imagine, my stir, came out of the gloom. It was Nathaniel Butterfield.

"Guess you're better," said he with a grin; "say, your head's pretty thick, eh?"

"What happened?" I asked feebly.

"Pitched off your cycle—a collision, or run into something, I suppose. Anyways there you were, kinked up like a broken wheel, and a scalp wound as large as life."

"It was the dark road," I murmured. "I was a fool to go so hard."

"That's very likely. I'm not contradicting

you," he said amicably. "And now let's have a look at the injury."

His hand was gentle as a woman's, and he handled me as dexterously as any doctor in a ward.

"Lucky you struck the plain road," he said, "and not a rock or a branch. You came off pretty soft, I reckon. We'll fix you up all right."

But by now I had recovered myself sufficiently to wonder at his presence.

"How did I come here?" I asked, "and where is it?"

He dabbed a sponge on my head cheerfully. "Now, you're talking," he said, "and I'll oblige you all I can. We found you in the road, and fetched you here in a cart; and as for here, it's Wilson Rudgwick's château."

"Rudgwick's!" I cried.

"That's so," he replied, eyeing me almost with benevolence; but ere I could comment on the astonishing explanation the door creaked and Rudgwick himself entered.

He was smoking as usual, and the fragrance of the cigar was sensible in the room.

"Come round, Butterfield?" he asked, and then to me: "Feel yourself?" Without waiting an answer he nodded and Butterfield left us. "So!" he began again, with his calm eyes on me. "You didn't get so far as Quimper, Lieutenant?"

"As you see," I replied dryly.

He stared at me. "I'm glad your crown's no worse," he said. "I feared you might have broken a bone or something. One never can say. But Butterfield's smart."

"He's a very admirable nurse, I think," said I. Rudgwick smiled. "Oh yes, he ain't bad at that too. He's pretty handy all the way round. He's a good Jack of all trades, is Nathaniel; and I brought him up from drummer and ought to know. But you know, boy," he shook his head indulgently. "You ought to know more than to buck up against Wilson Rudgwick."

There was a momentary pause, while I stared at him. "I don't say you weren't smart," he resumed after pulling at his cigar. "You are, or you wouldn't be here now. If I hadn't had a notion of you, you might have gone to perdition and back for all I would have held out a finger. But smart you were, and that sealed you; but not smart enough, boy."

I moistened my lips, for my ideas were coming back to me, coming in upon me indeed in a flood.

"Perhaps we had better understand each other," I said.

"That's good talking," he said approvingly. "Let's swab up the decks since there's not likely to be another mess, at least where we two are concerned. I took measure of you, Lieutenant, in that island, and I guessed you pretty smart, but your

bluff put me off. Englishmen can't bluff much and I took your statements at face value. That's where I just made a mistake. You said you'd known Fordyce two days. I took that in like milk, and dismissed you. You weren't in the game. And, by blazes, if it hadn't been for my trail, you'd have diddled me."

"Trail!" I cried in amazement.

"Why yes, trail," he repeated evenly. "What else have you been following on the last day and a half? You followed up Butterfield from Sandown. Now I'd reckoned on his being followed, and I wanted him followed, but I didn't think of you. I'd put my money on Alston. And you caught Butterfield at a restaurant and faced it out pretty nicely. That was when I first took suspicion you might not be quite on the straight; but I wasn't certain till I saw you at that inn to-night. That fixed me up, and I was glad I'd opened my bag's mouth wide. I thought it was wide enough to catch two."

"I'm beginning to see some sense in all this," said I as indifferently as I might. "I've been sandbagged, if I may put it in that way."

"That's a rough way of putting it," said Rudgwick, meditatively, flicking the ash from his cigar.

"And with what purpose?" I asked formally.

"Say, Lieutenant, you got on my trail—the

trail I had laid carefully, and was keeping full of scent, and you fell into the net. I reckoned when Butterfield came along, with his itinerary chalked so plain behind him, we should have someone along after him, but I hardly looked for you. I thought there was some doubt about that restaurant business. But we must take what the gods send."

He grinned at me quite pleasantly. Here he was, so to speak, tabling his cards, and pretences were of no use between us. I followed his lead.

"You wanted to bag Alston?" I asked.

"So," he assented. "But all's fish that comes to the net. I've got you."

"Again we return to that point," I said dryly; "with what object?"

"You're in this," he said. "You're up to your neck in it; and so you take the risks. You play the game by the rules, I take it, and know what to expect." He looked at me keenly, and then his glance travelled to my head. "I guess you're sore-headed, and I'm sorry. But why the blazes don't you stand from under? I suppose," he ended meditatively, "it's because you stand in with Alston."

"On the contrary," said I, "I spoke the precise truth when I told you I had only known Alston two days. I know nothing of his business affairs or your Montana mines."

He shot a swift glance at me. "That so?" he said slowly. "You don't know anything about our Montana mines. Well, where precisely do you come in, Mr. Kerslake? That's interesting me a lot."

"You have wonderful ways in America," I answered. "But on this side we don't reckon abduction as a legitimate factor in business operations."

"You don't?" he said with an intonation of interrogation, but he evidently wanted no answer, and was lost in thought. He smoked reflectively. "So," said he presently, "It's the young lady, eh? Well, Lieutenant, don't you get it into your head that there's any distressed damsel in this business, because there isn't. This lady's not going to be uncomfortable, not by a long way. She's going to enjoy a sea-trip; at least she'll enjoy it when she gets her sea-legs." His familiar grim smile flared and faded on his swart face. "The lady's fixed up right enough. I guess we can give you that assurance."

"Your assurance would be more valuable if I knew anything about you," I said shortly. "All that I do know is that you operate with women as pawns, a thing which we do not understand here."

"You'll understand that further along, I reckon," he replied unmoved.

"I don't know anything of your business with Alston and it doesn't interest me; but, damn it, I will not see an innocent countrywoman of mine dragged into your quarrels."

"Meaning mine and Alston's?" said he.

"Either of you—both of you," said I hotly.

He turned aside and screwed his mouth askew.

"I see how you stand now," he said, "and Alston's pretty smart to have got hold of you. He's to be congratulated. I'll make you an offer, Mr. Kerslake. Miss Lovell goes on a pleasure voyage, Mediterranean or anywhere you will, and comes back the picture of health and beauty if you'll clear out of this."

"I clear out?" I echoed.

"You're mixed up in this for Miss Lovell's sake. You think she isn't being played with fair. That's it, isn't it? Well, if you are assured that she's all right, you'll clear out!"

I laughed. "Good Lord, man," said I. "Do you suppose we do things that way in England?"

"I guess this is France," he said coolly. "Not that I take much stock in England either. I admit your English law and order is a bit stiffer than ours, but it won't hold together more than paste-board in the rain if I try. What I ask is your parole, so to speak, in return for my assurance."

"Absurd!" I ejaculated.

"You will see that it is parole on both sides," he said gravely.

"I utterly refuse" I said angrily. "You kidnap a young and helpless girl, and when she is followed by one who has no claim on her save that of common humanity, he is waylaid and bludgeoned by your hirelings; and then you stand there and talk of terms."

"That's it; you docket the case very succinctly," he said approvingly. "I'm a business man and I offer terms."

"Your terms be damned," I cried.

He shrugged his shoulders. "There's nothing to keep a fool from his folly, so far as I know, that was ever invented," he remarked. "I hope you'll find your quarters comfortable," he added as he went to the door.

I stopped him. "Stay," I said. "I should like to know exactly how we stand."

"The move's up to you," he said imperturbed. "If you like to pass your word to go out of it, you can go right back to-morrow. If not, I hope you'll make shift to make yourself comfortable here."

"You hold me prisoner?" I demanded.

"It comes to that," he admitted. "Prisoner of war."

I looked round the room with its massive cold walls. This then was designed as my cell. It seemed preposterous. He noted my glance. "Its

an interesting old place," he said; "they tell me these frescoes date from the fourteenth century. This was where the friars had their refectory. It's quite an antique place."

It was as if the proprietor introduced his house to an honoured guest. I could have laughed.

"I'll send Butterfield along, to see if you want anything," he added, and with a familiar nod passed out ere I could answer. I went to the window and peered out. The night was full, but was, as is ever the case in midsummer, still pregnant with unborn light. The stars gleamed in heaven, and the sickle moon shone in the Bay. From the window I guessed it was a drop of twenty feet to the ground, and from the contours and configurations of the building I came to the conclusion that I was in a tower. The window was barred heavily with iron on the outside. I returned and tried the door. It was locked. Nothing was lacking to constitute this room an ideal gaol. My head throbbed and I was dead-tired. The events of the last twenty-four hours had worn me out, and I could not "get the hang" of my situation; and so, like a wise man and an old campaigner who has been in many difficulties, I resolved on sleep. I told Butterfield that I wanted nothing, and I threw myself down on the bed which occupied one corner of the big chamber. I think I was asleep within ten minutes.

When I awoke the sun was well up, and streamed upon a beautiful world. The house lay, as I conjectured, some three miles from the sea, and the broad blue waters were flashing in the distance enchantingly. As I gazed my eye was caught by the raking masts and black hull of a schooner. It was undoubtedly the *Mermaid*, Rudgwick's yacht, that lay at anchor off the land. And he had taken possession of this old house to hold Alston prisoner. For it was clear that he had not expected my participation in the struggle. Well, he had snared me, but what of Alston? As I stood, wrapped in thought, and only half-conscious of that beautiful morning, the door opened and Butterfield made his appearance.

His greeting was friendly, as if there was nothing at all embarrassing between us, and he inquired what I should like for breakfast.

"They don't use breakfasts here as we do, Mr. Kerslake," he explained. "This is a one-horse place for food exceptin', they tell me, Paris. Paris is all right, they say, and I'm going to try when I get to Paris."

"I hope that will be soon," said I.

"Well, I can't exactly say," he said. "It depends on circumstances," and he looked at me shrewdly.

I gave him my order, and surveyed the situation during his absence. If Rudgwick adhered to his

plan of keeping me prisoner I was helpless to assist Miss Lovell, as helpless as if I passed my word to withdraw from her affairs. Rudgwick had me in a cleft stick, always providing I could not break out. That was the sole chance. But I wanted to see a little deeper into his schemes, and so was not averse from another meeting with him. I had discipline enough to keep my temper now as well as he, for I saw it was not by emotional outbreaks that anything might be accomplished. Brain must henceforward be matched against brain. It was at this point in my thoughts that Rudgwick appeared.

"I've looked in to sort of punch your ticket for the journey," he explained jocosely; "that is, if you'll go that journey."

I shook my head. "I like my quarters."

His smile was appreciative. "I like a stout opponent, who plays fair," he observed.

"Oh, I will play anyway, I warn you," I said.

"You think you would," he said. "But I guess you're white enough. If you want anything, ask Butterfield. He's ready on his part and has a way of getting round things. He's the trickiest man I've knocked up for many a year."

"Your factotum?" I asked quite civilly.

He nodded. "Do anything from cooking hot clam broth to bulling railway bonds."

"Well," said I, "and how long do I lodge here?"

"That depends on yourself," said he, "and after that on Fordyce."

"You have him too?" I asked quickly.

"No," he said slowly. "We didn't bag him. He was too fly. We couldn't hit on him."

"Yes, I sent him word," I said.

"Ah! That so?" said Rudgwick. "That was cute of you. I see, the diary dodge, was it? Yes, you're smart. Well, we didn't get him. But if he'll sign up now, I guess you're free now. If he's obstinate and you too, I guess I've got to entertain you a bit longer."

"Do you imagine this is the Wild West?" I asked. "This is civilised Europe."

"I fancy we're going to enliven civilised Europe, a bit then," said he, "and don't you forget it!"

I turned and looked out of the window, where the *Mermaid* rode, a stretch off the land on the unruffled sea.

"I'll tell you what, Mr. Kerslake," I heard Rudgwick's voice. "I'm willing to make a deal with you even now. Say, I'll better my offer; and if you'll give me that parole not to interfere with anything, I'll ship you along with the lady for a pleasure voyage."

He paused, while of a sudden my heart woke within me, and the glow of my hot blood thrilled me through. "You stand out of the game, and

you can see things are all right for yourself," he added, seeing me hesitate.

I shook my head. The temptation had been great; the renunciation was heroic. If I agreed to this course I abdicated all power to intervene in Miss Lovell's predicament. To accept were base selfishness, all the more pronounced because of my private feelings for her. If Rudgwick spoke the truth she would come to no harm whether I was there to safeguard her or not. And I might, though now a prisoner, be able to accomplish something. Even if I did not, the compact he proposed would be a shameful one.

"No; it is impossible," I said. "I'm your prisoner."

He nodded casually, and left me. I think he was amused, for he had never any doubt of himself, as I learned to know, and he never wasted words.

I had thus signed my own committal order, so to say, and must put up with the situation so created. Rudgwick vanished, on what business I could only guess. He had not Alston, and so was not wholly in the winning position, but he had powerful trumps in his hand, if not the "joker," at least he had right and left "bower," if Miss Lovell might be classified as the one and I as the other. That would enable him to put the screw on Alston, and, groping about in my ignorance of the exact dispute between them, I concluded that

probably Rudgwick would seek to bring his enemy to terms. Meanwhile I was left to the society of Butterfield, an excellent handy man, as I discovered. I made a thorough examination of my cell, during the first two days of my incarceration, and found no encouragement as a prison-breaker. The masonry was solid, the windows were staunchly barred and Butterfield was clearly, strongly supported. I made this out from his own statement, for he was communicative up to a point.

"Did you ever bargain to turn gaoler?" I asked him once; and he interrupted his work, which was that of making my bed, to consider.

"No; I guess not. I've been most things, but I never thought of that," he answered. "But what the boss says goes. I reckon that'll be comfortable now," and he patted the bed.

"See here, Butterfield." I went on gravely. "I'm a pretty strong man, and I shouldn't put you down at that, whatever your good points are. Not to put too fine a point on it, you look something of a shrimp. What's to prevent my knocking you over and making off?"

He grinned, stroked his curiously twisted face, and put a hand in his pocket. "I guess I'm not leaving much to the imagination," he said. "I don't pretend to be Hercules, and you don't suppose I put my hand in the lion's mouth without

taking precautions. If I were you, Lieutenant, I wouldn't put that experiment to the test."

"No," said I. "I've always taken you for a man of parts, and those parts evidently don't lie in your bodily frame. You go by brains, Butterfield."

"That's so," he said complacently.

"I wouldn't have asked, only I was curious to know exactly what protection you had."

"You'll have to try again, Lieutenant," he said, wagging his head pleasantly.

No; there was not much to be got out of Butterfield, but he would talk as much as I liked of matters that did not matter; and it whiled away the heavy hours to chatter with him. His good-nature was imperturbable, and he never took offence, even at my most irritable remarks. Perhaps that was natural, as he held the upper hand. He was possessed by an overwhelming admiration for the "boss." The boss was everything; he could do no wrong; and so far as Butterfield was concerned, the President of the United States took a very inferior position. Yet this loyalty I gathered, was founded rather on respect for Rudgwick's mental properties and business qualities than on any personal affection. He was quite a young man, I discovered, only 35, yet he wore a battered air with his changing hair, such as was consonant with a man of much more advanced years. He

had been for some years in Rudgwick's employment, and he esteemed him profoundly.

"The boss," said he approvingly, "is hot as hot cakes. I guess he's a wall, Sir, if you run up against him; and I wouldn't have that forty ton engine on my track, not for bonanzas."

"A successful man, as success is accounted in your country," I remarked.

"Why, ain't success success?" asked Mr. Butterfield with some indignation. "The boss can reckon himself in seven figures, and he's going to be reckoned in eight too. There's Rockefeller, and Morgan and Carnegie. I know," he said with a little strain of sadness in his voice, "that their piles is pretty big, and the boss has got a lot of way to make up. But I put my greenbacks on him. He'll catch 'em up, Sir, you trust me, and I shouldn't be surprised before long to see him wipe Rockefeller's eye."

"If he pulls off this Montana deal?" I said. Butterfield looked at me, but said nothing to this, only repeated:

"I guess he'll dust W. J.'s jacket for him."

The man was obviously ignorant; he was provincial to a degree; and (I gathered) this was the first time he had been out of America. But he was undoubtedly a handy man, good at shifts, and clever of invention. Yet his record spelled, according to his own showing, failure. He had

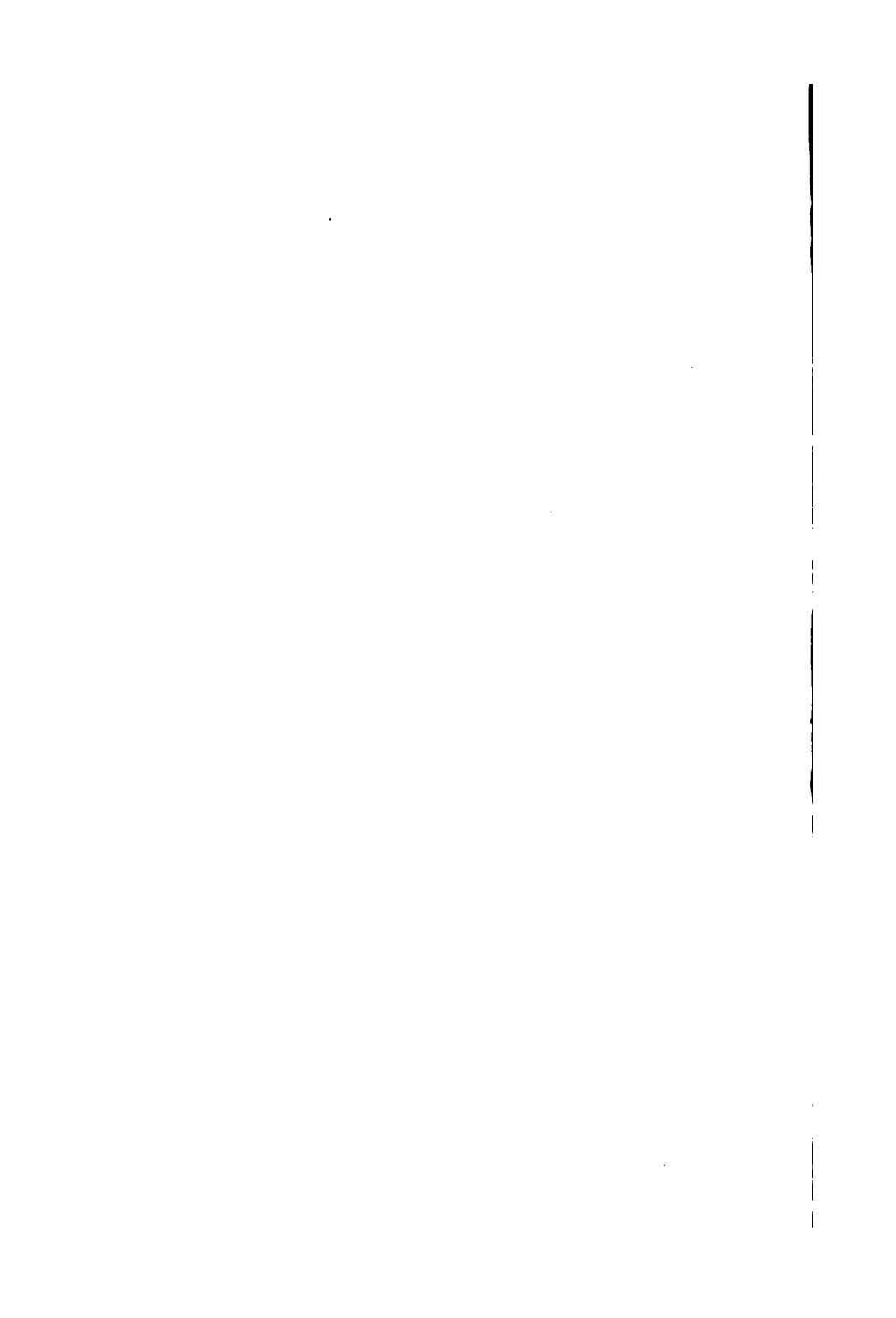
passed through many trades and callings, and succeeded at none. There was some defect in him which told against him in the long run. He made an admirable and useful servant, but he was no good as his own master; and he clung with almost touching fidelity to the man who was a success, and who had seen his possibilities and picked him up at a shabby period of his variegated career.

On the third day of my captivity the schooner disappeared from the Bay. By this time I was getting restive, for all my ingenuity failed before the facts of the situation, but I took a resolution that day. I had not succeeded so far in extracting from Butterfield anything of material use to me. I did not even know how I was guarded. That was to be remedied, as you will see.

When Butterfield entered to remove my *déjeuner* in his debonair and friendly manner I rose from my seat and suddenly gripped him by the middle as he bent over the table. The little man squirmed and kicked and fought like an imp. He bit into my knuckles deeply, and my shins were knocked raw with his heels. It was only when I slipped the serviette into his mouth that he gave in. Perhaps he did so with a sense of humour. He had fought but he was of no use where mere physical prowess was in question. I took from his pocket the revolver which I had suspected, and, having rolled him up in a smothered tangle



"It was only when I slipped the serviette into his mouth that he gave in"



in the blankets, went to the door. This I opened and slipped into the passage, turning the key behind me. When this was over I looked up to find myself covered by a Colt; and the man behind it was the puffy red-faced, bullet-headed man whom I had seen on Rudgwick's yacht, and who had watched me at Portsmouth.

It was his funeral, as he would have said, and I let my arm drop.

"All right," I said with a short laugh, "I'm going back. I'm not looking for an undertaker," and I turned the key again and re-entered. I had found out something which I did not know before. Butterfield was protected, and, if I was to make my escape, all my wits would be needed. They had carried me to this discovery, which was useful, and a point further also, as Butterfield realised presently. He had extricated himself from the bed-clothes, when I returned, and had taken the gag from his mouth.

"Lieutenant, if you'd taken the trouble to ask me," he said solemnly, "I could have told you that was no good, and prevented you from wasting your time."

"And saved your throat a bit, eh?" I said jauntily, with the revolver in my hands. It was a six-barrelled pin-fire weapon, quite small and neat. He looked at it.

"I reckon it's no go, sir," he said.

"No; but I know a bit more," I replied, and I placed the toy in my inner breast pocket.

"Say," he said solicitously. "You're not going to keep that?"

"Why, yes; it's safer here than with you, Butterfield," I answered. "You can see for yourself that I can't do anything with that blatant, gooseberry-eyed bos'un of yours without. So easy's easy, and let us cry quits. Only I keep the toy."

After a momentary hesitation he acquiesced, though I could see he did not approve of the new arrangement and only yielded to the argument of force. I had the weapon and there was an end of it.

"Well, Lieutenant, I reckon you're sensible," he said soothingly. "You won't be drilling any holes anywhere unnecessarily."

I sat down with a curious sense of growing confidence. What was it, after all, to have gained this petty advantage over a weakling?

"And yet," I said, "you would have drilled a hole in me."

"I suppose I would," he said coolly.

"Do you reconcile that with your conscience as a decent man?" I asked. "It looks like blank murder."

"No; I don't look at it in that light," said Mr. Butterfield argumentatively. "It's a kind of war we're on, and we take our risks."

"I'm only trying to rescue a poor girl from a dastardly abductor," I said sharply.

"That may be, Lieutenant," he said equably, after a pause. "I don't deny that may be from your point of view. But, it isn't philosophy, not by any means. See here," he went on, getting hold of his argument, and consequently showing more animation. "If you're doing business, you've got to take risks and the other fellow has too. Well, the boss takes his risks, and if he can crowd out Elihu K. Scanlan with a big popgun, he does it. That means hell for Elihu, and all his lot, but it's in the game, and he can't complain. It's a natural warfare, an' someone's bound to come on top, just as someone's bound to go under. I guess the boss's operations don't exactly mean theatre tickets all round. When he gets on the prowl, I tell you a tiger isn't in it," he said admiringly. "He scorches; he makes the pace hot. And some one's bound to fall out and die by the wayside. That's nature. You can't make an omelette without breaking eggs. Say," he broke off. "Is that omelette a fool affair or is it real good? They think a sight of it in some quarters."

"Oh, it's a daisy," I said lightly, for his sophistry, his excuses, his ingenuous and scandalous philosophy had tickled me. Mr. Butterfield amused me.

"I guess I've got to learn how to make an

omelette," he said thoughtfully, rubbing at his jaw where the serviette had hurt him.

"Make me one to-morrow," I said jocularly.

"I will, Lieutenant," said he as he left me, as cheerful and as alert and as composed as when he entered. As for me, I had one point gained, and I went over to the window and looked out on the afternoon sky. I still was without a plan, but I was no longer without a weapon. As I stared, I was aware of a movement nearby that arrested my semi-conscious eyes. The grille of the iron bars prevented me from obtruding my head more than a foot beyond the level of the window; but from my position I could see part of the wall of the house, and even a floor above me, but a little to the left was another grille such as my window. It was here I observed the movement. An arm emerged bare to the wrist and was lifted twice or thrice in the air. Above I noticed some fluttering timid birds. Someone was feeding them. I kept my gaze on the grille, and again the arm protruded. It was slimly rounded and white, and the cap of the sleeve above the elbow was of muslin.

It was the arm of a woman, the arm rather of a girl.

## CHAPTER VIII

### BREAKING OUT OF CHÂTEAU CABRIAC

I KNOW that where sexual matters are concerned, imagination is a diligent and impetuous usher. Our minds romantically go forward without due reason; we guess instinctively and are most generally wrong. We take a swallow to represent summer, and the part for the whole. Indeed in the matter of woman's beauty the part is too often greater than the whole. The texture, the symmetry, the general address of that slim arm, demonstrated to me youth and beauty. I stared, but it came not forth again. It was as if its mission had been completed with that single exposure. I was an idle man, and my wits were in despair; they fastened curiously on the new event—a girl's white arm through the embrasured window.

At that my pulse jumped. I looked seaward, whence the yacht had vanished, and then upwards at the grille. Was it another prisoner? Was it——?

Rudgwick had secured this château, probably for a summer month or two. It belonged, to

judge from the one room I had seen, to an impoverished family. And now for the first time I realised that this house could not have been taken after my interception. It must have been in readiness. It was not taken for me. Was it taken for Alston? That, of course, was possible; but the slim white arm vanishing into the white muslin frill about the elbow made me wonder. Where was Miss Lovell? She might be aboard the yacht. Indeed Rudgwick had indicated that this was so by his offer to me, but I had not accepted his offer, and he might have changed his mind. Would he indeed have run the risk of keeping his yacht in the bay for several days with that precious prize aboard while Alston, the disappointed bridegroom was at large and afoot? And if she were not in the *Mermaid* she must be—

I fancied I caught the flash of that beautiful arm even through the murk of the prison-bars. I could no longer doubt; at least it stirred me to believe, and I would believe it. I had faith in my dreams, then, faith in my destiny; faith, too, in the efflorescence of that Morning Glory. Sylvia Lovell was a prisoner in the château like myself.

When Butterfield entered he found me pre-occupied. "Come, Captain," said he, "we mustn't have you dull."

Although he had thus promoted me it did not

cheer me. "I don't like to see you pining, Captain," he added, and I really do not believe he did.

"You can make me rejoice," said I.

"Say, if there's any way I can do it, save one way, I'll do it," he declared.

He was so serious that I could have laughed, particularly as the idea came to me in that very moment. I smiled instead.

"Say," he resumed earnestly. "What's the matter with your fixing it up with the boss? He's all right. I'd a durn sight sooner earn a dime working with him than a dollar against him. Can't you fix things up?"

"To say the truth," I replied, "that idea has been in my head for some little time. It seems inevitable."

"That's so. It ain't worth it," he assured me. "There's no money in it, knocking up against the boss. I reckon he has a fancy to you, and he'll make it easy for you to climb down. You can settle on par terms, I'll go bail; yes, Sir."

"When I see him again——" I began, and he interrupted cheerily.

"You'll see him to-morrow, I reckon."

Here was some news which perhaps was not intended to reach me, for I could see from the expression that Butterfield's face took on that he regretted his slip. I was glad to know the date

of his master's return, for I had that idea in my head to nourish, and to embody in fact.

"I'll treat," I said with decision. "There's no fun in this anyway."

This resolution affected him sensibly. He nodded approval, and grew more friendly. I am certain he regarded me as one who had been worsted in a deal with Rudgwick, as Alston should be worsted. It was a mere matter of business, and there was no room for an ounce of sentiment in it on either side. The greatest rivals, when once peace is made, incline to co-operation. It is the swing of the pendulum, a natural re-action perhaps. So I believe Butterfield almost contemplated me as a possible ally. He explained the boss more fully to me in an amiable way, and offered no objection to answering some of my questions, one of which concerned the house in which we were.

"Well, it won't hurt you to know, Lieutenant," he replied, "and it don't damage us. Château Cabriac's what they call it."

Château Cabriac! Well, that piece of information also might be of use.

"Say," said he, when this trend of the conversation ended. "Say, I've learned how to cook an omelette, Lieutenant—a real French omelette. It's bully—not too dry and not too greasy. I'd like to do one for you."

"You are very kind, Butterfield," I said indifferently.

He was taken up with the notion, as pleased as a hen with a chicken, and danced off to the kitchen, I imagine, there to make a test of his newly acquired culinary skill.

When he returned, his queer swallow face was gone to a savage and ignoble redness, but it beamed on me, and he carried a plate in the midst of which lollopped, if I may put it in that way, a monstrous omelette *aux fines herbes*. The reckless creature in his enthusiasm had obviously broken all his eggs into the pan, and here was a dish I could not eat in a week. I told him so, and he seemed downcast at the news, patiently doubting my faith in his cooking. However I set those fears at ease by falling to at once, and for an early essay the mess was as good as needs be. The information brought him once more to the grin complacent.

"I said there was no dish I couldn't catch on to, if I saw it made," he declared. "I always was a natural hand at cooking, from a boy, when I used to watch my mother making picked-up cod-fish and such truck."

"I could eat it all in perhaps two days, Butterfield," I said with a sigh. "But more's beyond me now. Isn't there anyone to whom it would be a treat? It's a pity to waste a dish cooked with the art of a connoisseur."

I said it deliberately, for I wanted some confirmation of my astonishing guess earlier in the afternoon. I was "fishing" at random; but the bait was taken. Butterfield's eyes lighted suddenly.

"Why, yes," he said. "I reckon I can raise another customer somehow." He lifted the dish, and then was struck by a thought. "Reckon I'll get another plate," he muttered, and hurried away.

I had had, as I have said, but the hope of a possible confirmation of my thoughts. Now I saw a chance for more than confirmation. I took my pocket book, wrote on it, tore out the leaf, and folded it in a small roll. The omelette like a huge yellow pudding lay in collapse on the plate. I lifted one end gently and slipped the note well into the mess.

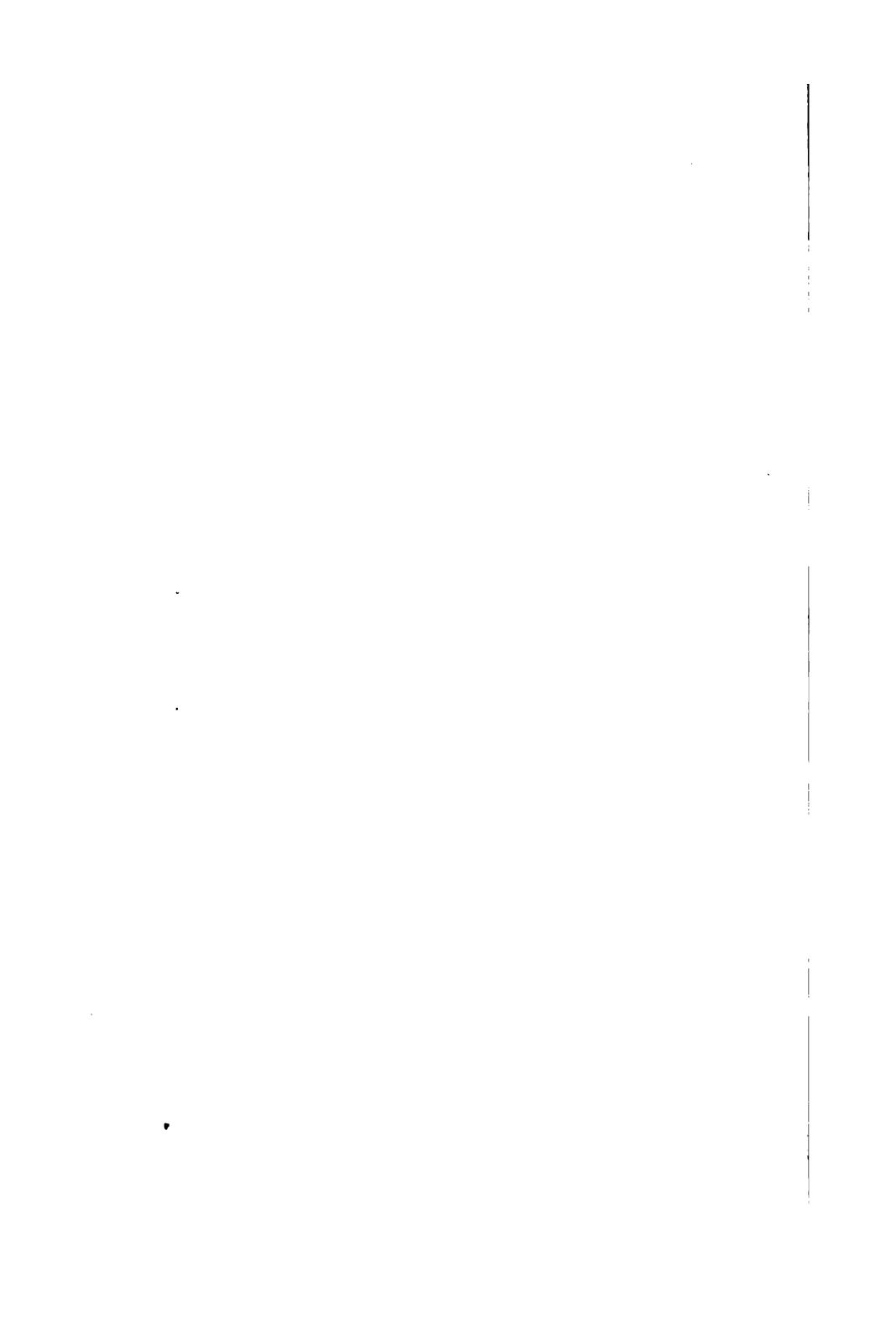
What I had written was this:

*If you are Miss Lovell wave hand thrice at window. Courage.* Kerslake.

Butterfield, on his re-entrance, came forward to the table, plate in hand, and made an adjustment of the omelette on the larger dish. He was in high spirits, as if he had made a big deal in stocks, and departed with alacrity. I listened to his steps along the stone corridor, and then there was silence. I had thrown a card at a ven-



**"I lifted one end gently and slipped the note well  
into the mess"**



ture, and it was of no consequence to me even if it should fall into the enemy's hands.

I crossed to the window and waited for quite half an hour, but there was no appearance at the grille above. Then Butterfield entered, and I was reluctantly withdrawn from my post.

"Was it approved?" I asked.

"Well, I think it will be," he said confidently. "It was better than the last I made, and only my second attempt."

It was all right then, and whoever had the precious omelette had not yet tasted it. I resumed my place of observation when he was gone and stood there half an hour longer. At the close of that time I started, for a soft arm, clothed in white muslin, mystic, beautiful, flashed three times through the embrasure and disappeared. I breathed deeply. I had almost given up hope. And now I must do what I had set myself to do, for the motive was doubled, nay quadrupled.

I took the pinfire revolver from my pocket and extracted two of the cartridges with the ramrod. These I carefully took to pieces, and secured the bullets. It was by now nearing dusk, and Butterfield would be bringing my supper at nine. I had to wait for that visit.

It was darkling when he came, unlocking the door, and carrying in my tray.

"I guess you want a light," he remarked.

I agreed, and setting the tray down he went towards the lamp in the further corner of the room. I moved silently towards the door, which he had, as usual, shut behind him. His back was towards me, as he attended to the lamp, and moreover the darkness of the room obscured my action. Outside I knew the puffy-faced ruffian stood sentry. I slipped the two bullets into the keyhole swiftly, and turned about just as Butterfield struck his match. He chatted in his customary way as he adjusted the wick, and then he went out. I listened.

The key turned in the wards a certain distance and then grated, I heard it being turned back, and again Butterfield tried to lock it, but unsuccessfully. After that it was wrenched out, and I heard the colloquy of voices outside. Presently the key was rumbling once more in the lock; and then there was silence. No doubt it occurred to Butterfield's shrewd mind that the noise might draw my attention to the defect in the lock. I knew the door was locked every time he went out, and might be concluded to suppose it was locked this time. The voices were in conversation without for a little longer and then there was silence. Butterfield had gone. I ate my supper with alacrity and appetite, and with a rising heart; and that done threw myself on the bed to rest and think. This deliverance of the supper was

always Butterfield's last appearance for the night, as he was wont to leave me to my solitude and my books until bed-time. The way was open now to me as far as Rudgwick's satellite in the corridor, and I must plan now to circumvent him. I cut one sheet into strong strips with my knife, and also tore a rag off the blanket; then I tied the strips together to form a long linen rope and hid it under my coat. I lay down on the bed once more and took up a book. I do not think I even was conscious of the title, for my thoughts were flying busily elsewhere. Outside the black bat night had settled on land and sea.

It must have been after eleven when I set forth on my venture. With the revolver lightly held in my fingers, I stole softly to the door, and listened. Nothing was audible. I seized the handle and turned it point by point, almost imperceptibly round; and when it had reached its limit of roll I pulled firmly in towards myself. The big door gave, but it gave with a low jar that sounded loudly in the stillness. I threw it wide instantly and was in the corridor at a bound.

The sentry was taken by surprise, and I had a grip of his right arm, and my weapon was at his forehead ere he could recover himself.

"I'll shoot," I breathed in his face, "if you struggle. Keep still."

He made no answer, but he made no movement to resist, and I managed to find his head and his pistol.

"Drop it," I commended, the cold muzzle of my revolver pressed against his eyebrow. The weapon fell into my hand. I put it in my pocket, and drew out my linen rope and the blanket rag. The latter I used as a gag, inserting it in his mouth and tying it round his head; and that accomplished I proceeded to tie him up with the sheet, his arms behind his back and his legs together at knee and ankle. When I had finished he was trussed very successfully, and I think I never made better use of some sailors' knots I had learned in my midshipman days. I had him secure, at least until someone should discover him. And now the third stage of my adventure was before me.

I took the box of matches, and striking one looked about me. The corridor ran for some distance and then ended in a stone staircase to the upper floor. This I mounted and reached a landing off which several rooms opened. The room I wanted could not, however, be just here, seeing that this was immediately above my cell; and so I opened a door at random, and groped my way in. A little faint light from the stairs crept through a window and showed me a bare chamber falling into decay, that witnessed to the receding

fortunes of that house. At the further end was another door, and crossing the room I turned the handle. The door would not budge, and I struck a match and examined it. A key was in it, and I unlocked it gently, opened it, and passed in.

The sound of regular breathing reached me, acquainting me that this chamber at least was tenanted, but I could see nothing for the starlight was occluded by heavy curtains across the window.

For a moment I hesitated, revolving alternatives hastily in my mind, but I was armed, and to take chances is often the wisest course. So I struck another match swiftly, and the room sprang at once into relief. A cry came to my ears, and in the dimness of the light I saw Miss Lovell, sitting up in her bed, her face aghast, newly come out of her sleep.

"H'st! It's I," I whispered. "Can you get ready quickly? We've no time to lose, if we're to get away."

The girl had pluck and spirit. Amidst all the confusion of her position, startled, as she must have been, by my appearance, and heavy with her somnolence she said, "Yes," at once.

There was a sound from below, as of feet on the bare corridor.

"They've discovered. We must go now," I said, and there being no time for ceremony, I went quickly forward. "We must get away from

here at any risk. Can you wrap something round you? I will take anything you may require afterwards."

The match went out, leaving us in darkness, but in that darkness I had her answer. I could hear she was afoot and she passed me with a rustle of her night-robés.

"I'm ready," she said in a low voice, almost at once, and I lit a match. She was standing a little away, her face pale in the yellow light, clad in a long black cloak that reached her ankles; and her feet were in slippers.

"Your dress!" I asked; and obeying the directions of her glance, seized in my arms a bundle that was set on a chair nearby; for that room like mine was bare of comforts and conveniences.

The sound of feet in the corridors was growing, and with a gesture of invitation to her I glided to the door, and went out. Someone was mounting the stairs hurriedly. I looked about me, and then faint and friendly stars shone on a door to my right. I opened it, and a long gallery was before me. Miss Lovell and I passed through as the advancing feet reached the landing. But with the closing of the door all light vanished and we moved in a profound darkness. I put out my disengaged hand and took hers, and we went forward in a gingerly tentative fashion not knowing what awaited us, or would befall us. So black

was our passage that we knew not where we were treading, and we might easily have walked into the chasm of an open staircase.

Presently I knocked against a wall, which barred our way, and leaving my hold of Miss Lovell, began to grope along it. I discovered now that a flight of stairs descended to the floor below, and these we took cautiously, thus gaining once more the level of my prison cell. But where we were in relation to that I could not guess. The house was by this time alive with sound, and footsteps were audible everywhere. It was quite clear that our escape had been discovered, but as yet there was no one on our immediate track. If I were only able to determine one of the entrances I felt I should have no fears, what with the assistance of the night and of my revolver. A window gave light to the stone passage in which we now found ourselves, and fell upon a doorway opposite. As I noticed this I was aware of footsteps hurrying from my right, and pushing the door open, pulled Miss Lovell in after me. I had not time to close the door before the pursuers were in the corridor, and then I dared not. I heard Butterfield's voice.

"I guess they're below; we've been most other places." Had they been here then? I glanced round, and behold I had taken refuge in my own prison! No wonder they had not thought of

looking for us there. The feet trailed off down-stairs and we were left to our luck. I ran to the window and looked out. This story was about twenty feet from the ground.

"There's one chance for us," I said to my companion. "We must go by the windows on this floor. Will you trust me?"

She clutched my arm impulsively. "Yes," she breathed. How I blessed her for her confidence and her sensibility! Had she shown signs of hysteria or fear we should have been undone. My window, of course, was guarded by the iron bars, but it was not likely that all the windows were in the same case. We ventured out cautiously and I explored the further end of the corridor. On the right and left were doors, and dismissing the thought of the right-hand room as one facing the front of the house and therefore undesirable, I opened the other door. It was an irregular stone chamber, not quite so large as mine, furnished with a bed, and from my cursory glance I judged it to be occupied by one of Rudgwick's men, possibly by Butterfield himself. Beyond a further door led into a further room, an antechamber, full of mouldy curtains, worm-eaten carpets and broken boxes. But here, unattractive as the scene was, hope first truly dawned upon me; for a window lay open from this room into the ulterior night, and looking out,

I descried the dim stack of a building beyond. There was urgent need of haste, for I knew not when Butterfield and his gang might return when they found we were not below; and so, whispering an instruction to Miss Lovell, I threw the bundle I carried out of the window, leaped over the sill and dropped.

I fell on the hard ground, and my feet were stung and numb, but I held out my hands.

"Now," I said. "Don't fear."

It was, as I said, no time for scruples and unnecessary embarrassments, and she knew it. She crawled over the edge, hung a moment by her hands and then let go. I caught her in my arms, so that her slippers feet barely touched the earth, and I could feel the soft lines of her beautiful body through her investing cloak. Even in that moment my heart beat fast and I would have held her still. But I let her go at last and in my ears resounded the groaning of a big door opening. It was the house-door giving on the yard and rolling on creaking and neglected hinges. I pulled her into the environing shadows of the buildings.

Voces emerged to us, and I drew closer among the darkness. This was some annex to the house proper, and the stars had no chance in the immediate neighbourhood of that mass of buildings. We crept softly along the wall, anxiously groping for a way of escape, until at last it ceased, and I

guessed we must be at the entrance to some shed. So much the better; they would hardly suspect us of harbouring so near the house, and at least there were probably opportunities of defence within. I drew Miss Lovell in and there we waited in silence. Feet were flying about the house, and lights were flashing. Shouts reached us but we could not make them out; and then momentarily there was silence, as the searchers streamed towards the front of the house on the suspicion of a clue. I seized the opportunity to strike a light, to examine our refuge. It proved to be a sort of stable, and of ample size. A broken down cart in one corner together with some decaying harness, with the straw showing, gave the shed the air of a charnel house of dead things. A litter of remnants, of things off-cast, of rags, of discarded utensils, added to the melancholy aspect. But in the very centre was that which made my heart sing,—Alston's motor tricycle.

I ran towards it, almost forgetful of the hazards I risked, and made a cursory inspection of it by matchlight. Nothing seemed askew, save the spokes of the front wheels which were twisted, doubtless in the accident contrived for me. I switched on the current, and started the engine, and with an initiatory hiss and gasp it began to beat. Here was our chance providentially happened upon. I made Miss Lovell mount in the fore-seat, and myself bestrode the bar behind.

The engine thumped heavily; my last match went out.

And now from the other side of the houses poured the voices in some new excitement. The hunt was returning to the rear, and doubtless an examination of the out-buildings would follow. There was no time to lose, and I pulled the lever.

The tri-car groaned, and puffed out through the wide doorway, just as a figure came round the corner of the house. The noise of the engine was unmistakable and a loud cry arose on the air. The car, gathering power, swept along, passed the figure like the wind, and, narrowly shaving the house in the darkness, slipped into the drive beyond. Now many voices mingled in the air. But I kept the car as straight as I could, with her nose, so to speak, to the ground. She wobbled on and off the road, now half on the grass, with one wheel in the air, and now half toppled over to starboard. Yet unless she came absolutely to a wreck, and we were injured, I had no fear of the pursuit. Presently the report of a gun sounded in the night, and something rattled under me. Here was evidence that this desperate party would stick at little to compass its ends, or rather the ends of its master. The shot had been fired low with the hope probably of disabling the car; for answer she continued to bound along in the subdued darkness.

## CHAPTER IX

### THE OSIER SWAMP

We were by this time, as I estimated, out of gunshot, and so, fearful of an upset in the darkness and on that unknown track, I slackened speed. Miss Lovell sat before me, vaguely determined against the open starlight, but she made no sound, and preserved the stillness of a mouse. The cool night air struck my face pleasantly with a savour of the sea in it, but I was too anxious to make any vivid observations. I did not know when the grounds of the Château Cabriac ended, nor what came after. French roads were, I knew as a rule admirable, but were they so in this remote corner of Brittany? However, I had no alternative but to trust to luck and my own wits, and so we drove on at a prudent speed through a tangle of overgrown trees.

The road presently took a turn, and I saw dimly that we had gone through a gap in the wall, probably the original gateway of that ancient and impoverished domain. If so now we were upon a highway, and must be content to follow whither it led. Clear of the park of trees the

road lay more manifest under the luminous heaven, and I increased the pace. The car, humming cheerfully, began to climb a hill. The absence of hedgerows on each side improved the light, and I thought I could see vaguely outlined and distant the pile of the gloomy château. Then we entered a sunken lane, and it disappeared. We ascended and descended alternately for some time, and now the prospect of the sea had sunk behind us, and we seemed destined to go inland. Probably, I reflected, that was safest for us, though by this time, if Alston's telegram had been obeyed, the yawl would be somewhere in the bay. However, whether I wished to go to the shore or to the hills it was all one; I must obey the road submissively, and so I let the car run passively and without any demonstration of volition on my part.

I avoided side ways as likely to prove illusive, and kept to what I conceived to be the main road. Yet I may not have succeeded in this aim, owing to the obscurity in which we were wrapped. All I know is that we had been going some twenty minutes when a stack of buildings on my left which had emerged blackly into view, took my eye suddenly and stood forth revealed as the château itself. We had taken a complete circle. Coming to this conclusion I did not hesitate at the next turning to leave the road, and follow a

by-way, which curved along exiguously for some time, and passed full in view of the château. And now though we were not discernible for any distance it began to fret me that we were audible. The rhythmic beat of the engine pulsed out in the night, not loudly, but unmistakable for anything but what it was. I began to get anxious, for I could see a light flashing across a field, and still the engine throbbed and sobbed through the darkness. On one side of us lay what appeared to be an open moor; on the other meadows, and across those meadows a light dawned; while along the road in front of us came another. I recalled my own "accident," and I was in no humour for another with that unscrupulous gang in the offing; and so I deliberately turned the car off the road and out upon the empty rugged heath.

She moved gallantly, jerking and kicking on the rude track, but, alas, her voice could still be heard, and I had no doubt that the pursuit, which had been thus picked up again, had been directed to the moor. It was an amazingly uncomfortable ride, across rough and broken ground, over boulders, through furze and bracken, and in the trough of ancient ruts. And soon we passed out of the open into a region of pines through which we careered blindly, now unable to tell the track from the uncertain heath. Bad as the track was it was yet some sort of guide, and now it had van-

ished. It was at this period that I began to despair for the first time of our breaking away from that accursed château. For our speed had dwindled greatly, so that the enemy could not be far away, and they were persistently advertised of our whereabouts by the noise of the engine. I was divided in my mind as to our best course when of a sudden the car tripped, toppled and rolled over on itself and us down a steep slope.

Luckily the fall was broken by sand and furze, and the car, which had been rocking and crawling, had only just touched my leg. Otherwise we might have been seriously injured. As it was I rose quickly, extricating myself, and hastened to Miss Lovell. She had been thrown clear of the car, but her head had come in contact with the root of a gorse-bush and she was dazed. I sat her up and attended to her, heard her long little sigh, and was aware she had come to herself; and then the sound of hoofs padded in my ears. I looked up from the hollow into which we had fallen, and the starlight gleamed on Butterfield astride a mule, to which he was clinging with both hands. I could have put a pistol shot into him or his mount as it laboured by, and I would have done so if there had been any object in it. It was war between us; and I had no scruple in war. But it was wiser to keep quiet and so I let him go and devoted myself once again to Miss Lovell.

She declared she was all right now, and was fit to travel, asking eagerly whither we were bound. If I had only known myself I might have answered her with better assurance. As it was I feigned confidence as to our destination, telling her that we were set for the shore, and that Alston was no doubt off that coast with a yacht.

"Mr. Alston!" she said, tremulously, and paused; and then: "Did he send you to find me?"

I denied this, for to my own mind I would not admit that Alston was responsible for my position in that strange story. The boat was mine, and mine was the intention. I would have sailed on the mission of rescue without Alston, in despite of Alston.

"What made you come?" she asked, wistfully.

"I found you were gone; you were said to have been abducted and—and—you were my country-woman," I ended vaguely.

She was silent. "I don't understand anything," she said. "I seem to be the shuttlecock of—of fortune. It was very generous of you to come to rescue me—unless—" she paused.

"Unless what?" I asked, curiously.

"Oh, I don't know," she answered sadly. "I'm all at sea. Why should I be kidnapped like this and treated so barbarously, as if it were the middle ages? Think of it, Mr. Kerslake. I met you only a week ago and this man, Rudgwick, less

than that, and here you are both mixed up—Oh, I can't understand," she broke off piteously.

I thought I saw, and it went to my heart. Yet after all why should she not be suspicious, who had been the rough sport of gamblers? She feared that I too who had come into her life almost simultaneously with Rudgwick was only taking a hand in the game with him. I could not be angry with her, but I was deeply mortified.

"I want you to understand one thing only," I said earnestly, "and that is that I came to save you. I don't know anything more than you do, Miss Lovell. I strayed into the strange events of the last week. Accident (perhaps it was more than accident) brought me into them."

"Why did you follow me here?" she asked quickly.

I dared not tell her the truth that was on my tongue, that I loved her. "Who ever loved that loved not at first sight?" But it was unfair if not to Alston, then to her, at least just then.

"I hope I should always come to the help of a woman in distress," I said.

"Thank you," she said simply, but impulsively. "Oh thank you!"

But there was no time to discuss or explain there, for at any moment we might be discovered. The very silence of the car might betray us. It had vanished in the moor, and they would realise

that we had stopped and would be encouraged in the hunt. We had fallen into a cleft in the heath, some ten feet deep, grown with gorse and bracken, and as this natural gully sloped away it seemed wise to follow its course downwards. Consequently we resumed our flight, as silently as might be, stumbling in the darkness at times in the rugged path. After we had been walking for half an hour my companion came to a halt.

"Must we—is it much farther?" she asked.

I saw she was worn out and was struck with remorse.

"No," I said, after a moment's reflection.  
"I think we can find a hiding place now."

The light of the promised dawn was already suffusing the sky, and we could see more clearly. My eyes went round in search of a refuge.

"I would have gone on if—I don't think—you see," she said plaintively, "I've only got slippers on."

I remembered now. How cruel I had been!

"Poor child!" I said. "You shall rest," and I led the way towards a mass of furze. With the aid of a stick I succeeded in making a breach in this, and within was an ample space dominated by the withered spines and thorns of the lower branches.

But the difficulty was not insuperable, and with the aid of plenty of bracken I made the hol-

low fairly comfortable. That done I introduced her to it, and persuaded her to lie down and sleep. She obeyed me like a child, and, closing the entrance to this improvised dwelling, I seated myself on the fern to keep watch against the coming of the dawn.

"Mr. Kerslake," a small voice interrupted me.

I was alert in a moment. Was it not comfortable? Oh, yes, it was quite snug, but there was something—

"Would you—would you mind letting me have what you brought," she said.

"What I—" suddenly it came home to me. I had snatched up her dress and carried it, all the way for her, and now it was gone. "I'm so sorry," I stammered. "It was tied on to the car. I will go back and get it."

"Oh," she said in dismay.

"I will go back," I said, but her voice came to me troubled but firm.

"No, you couldn't. It was not your fault. You had other things to think of. Please don't think of it. I shall be all right. Thank you so much for all your kindness," and the furze rustled and was still.

It was an hour later, when the dawn was on the hills, that I parted the bushes and looked in. She lay asleep, curled up among the great fronds of the bracken, her lips parted slightly, and the

thin coat to her ankles above the slippers foot. It was that hour at which human life is at its lowest, when dreams come, and the chill of the night strikes deep. I took off my coat and laid it softly over her body, and when I had resumed my post as sentry, I declare that the edge of that nocturnal air, so far from being chill to me, warmed me like wine. For my thoughts were like fire, and under my coat rose and fell the bosom of my love.

The sun called us over the hills, and Sylvia Lovell stirred in her thorny bower about four of the clock. She parted the furze and came forward into a world of dew and sunshine.

"You gave me your coat," she burst forth precipitately. "You mustn't."

And then, as she met my eye her girlish impetuosity gave way to embarrassment; she coloured and drew back.

"Did you sleep soundly?" I asked.

"I feel stiff," she said with a little smile.

"You see, however deeply covered, the earth does not give way," I explained. "It is a reluctant bed."

I looked beyond her across the blue-green firs, to where the sea was sparkling in the bay, and there was the black schooner. Rudgwick was back then, and back in time to hear of our escape. I wondered with a grim satisfaction how he would

take it; if I had properly interpreted him, hardly, and in a most businesslike way. It was time we were gone.

The hollow in the moor led away in a gentle slope through broken land towards the sea, and for the sake of better security we held to that cover. The sun was warm, and the dew was drying on the herbage, yet we went in a pleasant wetness which was refreshing to the imagination; for the new day had a threat of great heat in it. After the exertions of the night, I will confess that I felt very hungry, but I saw no prospect of breakfast, and indeed was but vague in my plans. I was for the sea at any rate, and doubtless we should come upon either village or cottage where we might get food and shelter until I got a little deeper glance into the future.

The track we were following gradually stole down the heights and became a little sandy path betwixt two rises; a little further we were upon a green flat through which a stream purled. We were now deep in a valley, and had lost sight of the sea; but clearly this brook would carry us to it, and so we made our way along the bank comfortably enough. Presently, however, our confidence was rudely broken, for some distance away on the slope to our left I caught sight of a mounted figure, and upon the further side of the little valley another. As I made this discovery the riders

increased their speed, and I knew that our pack of hounds had not yet given up the chase. Here alas, the scent was hot.

At this moment there was a cry behind us, and I turned only to make out scarcely a quarter of a mile away a third pursuer. There was no time to spare; we were taken on each flank and in our rear, and only one direction remained to us. We must go forward. If it came to the worst I had my revolver, but I was unwilling to make use of that, outrageous as the conduct of this unscrupulous gang had been. Firearms would make trouble for us, nor did I credit Rudgwick with a desire to bring bloodshed into his piratical game. I took Miss Lovell by the arm.

"Can you go faster?" I asked. "They are on our trail again."

"Yes, yes," she cried, with one scared glance behind, and she began to run.

She ran like a girl, hampered by her cloak, and the way was uneven. Here and there the stream spread out into little marshes through which we ploughed ankle deep in mud and water, and occasionally was the bole of a fallen tree to surmount, or some other obstacle to compass. And all the time our pack was gaining on us.

The stream slipped round a bend in the widening valley, as if here it was in flight like ourselves, and would escape into the sea; but when we

reached the corner we saw not the sea before us, but a forest of reeds and red osiers, into which the water disappeared. Behind us pressed the three men, but one was in difficulties in a boggy part of the valley, into which his mule had sunk above the hocks. I could now recognise Butterfield with his uncomfortable seat on his mule, and with him an unknown man, who struck and lashed his animal ruthlessly. What lay before us I could not guess, indeed I had hardly time to consider. I acted almost on the impulse, and, taking a firm hold of my companion, I ran headlong into the osiers.

The ground oozed with slush, but I limped on, dragging heavy feet out of the mud, and supporting the girl, until we must have gone some thirty yards into the osiers, and then I must perforce rest, being breathless. I listened, but I could not hear anything. One thing was certain,—that the pursuit could not be carried into that marshy place on mules. Whoever ventured here must venture afoot. We stood in water two feet deep, and the slime below it sucked voraciously at us, as though it would drag us bodily into the morass.

“Can you go a little farther?” I whispered.  
“We must reach firmer ground.”

She nodded, for her breath was out, and, pushing the osiers aside, I resumed our progress. In

this way we penetrated a hundred yards or more without finding ourselves free of the marsh. But here there were now patches of firm earth, and open spaces. The osier bed, as I conjectured, occupied the spreading fan which marked the issue of that stream upon the shore. If therefore we pushed on we should reach the sea, which could not be more than a mile away. But ere we did so food and rest were necessities, and I saw no chance of securing the former. The latter we took when we felt comparatively safe, and occupied the time in endeavouring to scrape some of the thick coating of mud from our garments.

"Exhausted?" I asked.

"A—a little," she answered with a deprecating smile, and added bravely, "I'm rather hungry."

I told her we should get our déjeuner presently, and we passed some poor but comforting jests about early rolls and coffee.

"Was it—was it that man Rudgwick?" she asked next.

"No," said I. "I recognised only Butterfield, but I have no doubt that Rudgwick has inspired the hunt. His schooner came into the bay during the night, and he must know of our escape."

"Oh, why does he want me?" she cried tearfully.

I put my hand on hers. "Don't bother your head with problems and questions. You're being

used as a pawn in a game to checkmate Mr. Alston. Don't let anything worry you, except how to get away; and don't let that worry you either, for I'll look after that."

I spoke lightly, and even jocularly, and I could see that I had reassured her. The poor girl was terribly bewildered by the transactions of the last week, and I did not wonder that they should have appeared to her as a nightmare in which she moved.

As we talked I heard a sound which seemed to bespeak the approach of a body through the osiers. We were on dry ground, well-hidden by an environing circle of reeds, and I held up my hand to enjoin silence. The noise drew nearer, and now was unmistakable, nearer still, and we caught our breath. Would it blunder our way? If so, a conflict seemed inevitable. I fingered the weapon in my pocket. No, the noise seemed to be going round us, as it were the clumsy traffic of an animal that had wandered into the osier forest. Branches cracked, and then there was silence.

We said no word to each other, but waited. The noise had entirely ceased, and I came to the conclusion that the person or animal had gone off into the distance. We resumed our way as soon as we had recovered, and pushed along the firmer ground which we had reached with more

comfort. I was in front making the path easier for Miss Lovell, and, as I turned to address her with some word of caution, I was aware of a man a dozen paces away. He was standing in the reeds, and an open space of slime separated us. I put my hand instinctively into my pocket, and a rough voice broke out:

"I've got a sight on you."

His swarthy face was illumined with a grin. Beyond question here was one of Rudgwick's pirates, and he had me at his mercy. Resistance would do no good, with that long and level revolver at my head.

"I reckon marshes don't tell no tales," any more'n the dead," he chuckled. "They wouldn't find nothing here till the day o' judgment, hey?"

"What do you want?" I asked sharply.

"Oh, you're innocent, boss, ain't you?" said the ruffian with a leer. "What do I want? Why I take it that bit of molasses by your side's what I want. I don't take no stock in you, but I got to."

"Very well," said I coolly. "Come over and take us."

"Precisely," he returned with a wink. "I like the look of that place of yours better'n mine."

As he spoke he pushed aside the reeds, with the revolver at cock, and edged round towards

the path along the margin of the pool of slime. Sylvia stood by my side, and I felt her tremble; she had seized my arm, and her gaze was upon the swarthy thickset scoundrel who crept deliberately closer to us. He was within six feet now, but the bog of ooze parted us still.

"Seems to me, mister, you take it with your hair oiled," said the fellow with his malevolent grin, and then, as if suddenly perturbed in mind, he stopped and frowned. "Now, I wonder what the hell's your game," he remarked.

I gave him no answer, but my arm was about Sylvia Lovell, and I was hardly conscious of the fact; nor I think, was she.

"I kin draw a bead on you," he observed with a scowl, and his finger was on his trigger.

Miss Lovell gave a little hysterical cry, and bringing her face on my breast, clung to me. A grin dissolved his scowl. "Right," he said. "Thar's no painter there, I reckon, only a tame cat," and he began once more to sidle along. The girl's weight was upon me; she sobbed on my heart, out-worn by the stress and dangers of the night. My free hand pressed my pinfire revolver. He had reminded me: the marshes were as secret as the grave.

"Hands up, by God!" he thundered, with his eyes on my pocket. "Hands up, or——"

Ere he could finish his foot slipped on the

rough and slithering earth, and after an ineffectual attempt to recover his balance he fell outwards headlong into the slime, while the report of his revolver rang out sharply. The bog opened its ravening maw and closed over him.

Sylvia hung desperately about my neck, and even if I had desired to assist the ruffian I should have been too late. He sank like a stone, and the slime sucked and rocked above his body, as though it licked its lips and awaited the next victim. I shuddered and turned away, the girl still in my arms. The marsh would tell no tales. He had spoken his own epitaph.

When the momentary qualm was over I turned my thoughts to our own plight, for the horror of that sudden tragedy had made me sick with fear. Here we were in the centre of a terrible marsh, with death on all sides, and with no knowledge of the proper direction to take, nor any certainty indeed that there was a proper direction. Miss Lovell came to herself with a sigh.

"Where is he?" she asked in frightened tones.

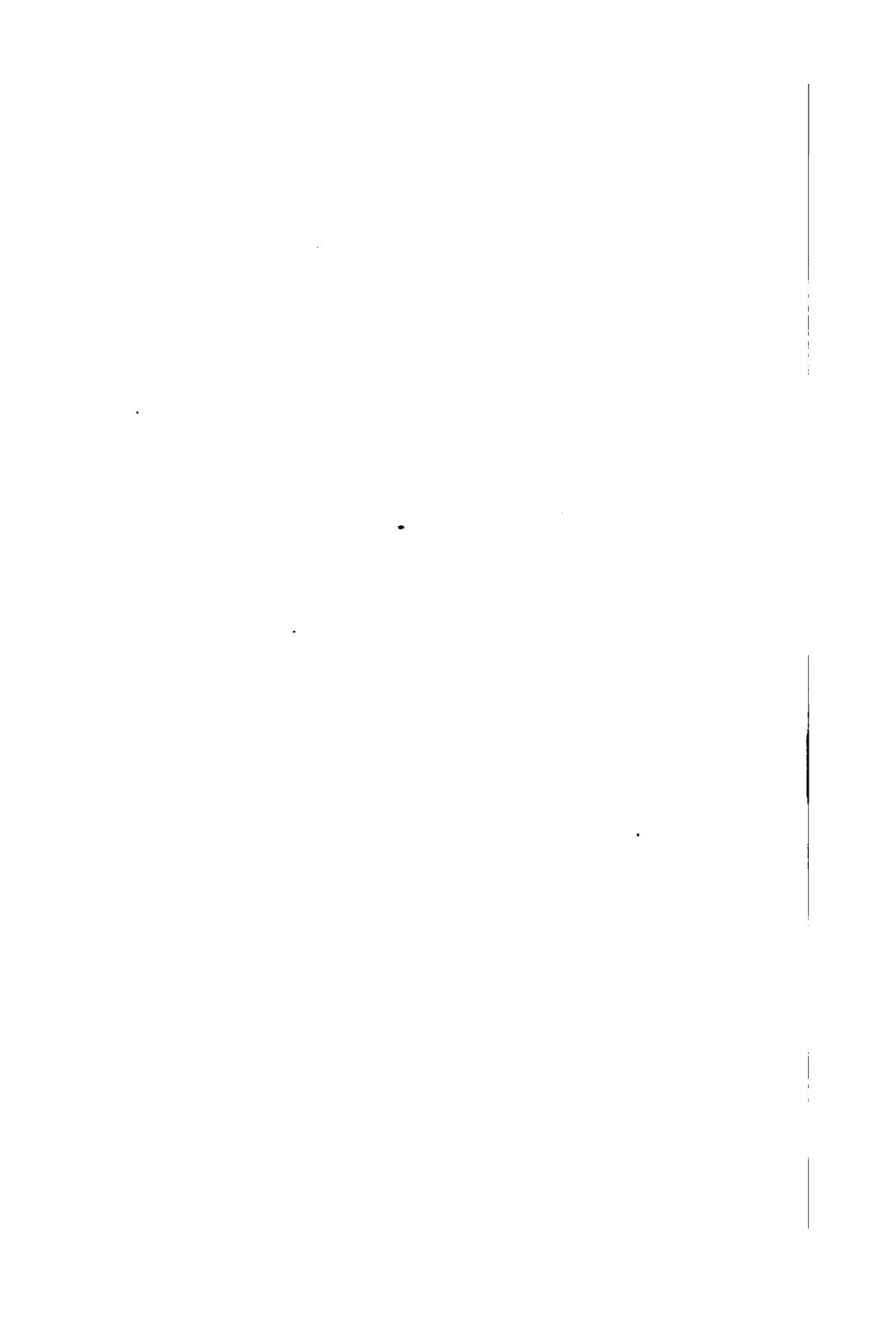
"He has gone, child," I said. "You will not be troubled by him more."

"Did you shoot him?" she asked fearfully.

I shook my head. I shrank from explaining. Apart from the horrid fact of that ugly death the newly realised peril of our situation would appal her.



**"After an ineffectual attempt to recover his balance, he fell headlong  
into the slime."**



"He is gone," I repeated.

"But—but I heard a shot," she said tragically.  
I displayed myself with a gesture, as it were,  
smilingly offering myself for examination.

"He missed, and is gone."

"Oh!" she shuddered. "Let us go," she said;  
and nothing loath I led the way deeper into that  
osier wilderness.

## CHAPTER X

### THE AFFRAY ON THE SANDS

ALTHOUGH I was attended by anxious fears as to the outcome of our journey, it seemed clear to me that in a little we had accidentally hit upon a pathway. It was a narrow ridge of earth grown with reeds and withies, somewhat above the elevation of the water, and winding tortuously—I trusted for firm ground. No doubt this was a road through the swamp which was used by the inhabitants of the sparsely peopled region. There were marks of the passage of feet, although from the look of it few travellers went that way. However, the mere fact that we were upon a sort of highway through the marsh inspirited me.

It was now well on in the morning, and we had had no food. At the rate we were making it did not seem as if we should break our fast for some hours, for when once we were clear of the marsh we had no assurance that we should be near any human habitation. The sea undoubtedly lay before us somewhere, and if we succeeded in reaching the shore we should be in the way to strike a village. At times it became difficult to push

through the vegetation, and we must have been afoot quite half an hour before we were surprised by the sudden disappearance of osiers, and reeds. The path conducted us out upon a clearing of moss and grass, and in the centre was a wooden hut, that looked out upon a tiny sheet of water.

I had not expected to find human life in that desolate and forbidding spot, but the explanation obtruded itself from the bundles of withies that lay about. It was evidently the hut of an osier-cutter, an assumption which was borne out when we reached the door. This stood open to the miniature lake with its fringing forest of reeds, and the blue sky sparkled in the water. Altogether the place took on a cheerful aspect despite its loneliness and remoteness, which was incongruous with the experiences through which we had just gone. Our association with the marsh was one of tragedy, of fear; but this oasis wore a bright face and Nature actually smiled.

A girl's face stared at us from the interior of the hut, with mingling alarm and curiosity; and I went up to the entrance, and saluted her. She dropped the sewing she held and shook her head. She spoke only Breton, I supposed, and I had only French. I made certain signs which endeavoured to acquaint her with our condition and plight, emphasising more particularly our hunger.

This she seemed to understand, nodded cheerfully, and, with a look of interest at Miss Lovell, got off her chair. It was then I perceived that she was crippled, for she caught up a crutch briskly and hobbled to the fire. In a quarter of an hour we were feasting on good bread, eggs and the remains of boiled poulet, and I think I never ate with better appetite in my life. My companion also did justice to the food, and seemed to recover something of her spirit with the meal.

The girl sat, crutch to hand, and watched us with absorbed interest, but particularly was she engrossed with Miss Lovell, whom she surveyed with frank curiosity not a little disconcerting in the circumstances. I found she was not wholly deaf to French, but was conversant with a few words, so that by the aid of this common ground and by dint of signs I secured such information as I needed. Her grandfather lived here, but was absent cutting osiers, and would not return till evening. She lived alone with him, and had done so since childhood and her mother's death. Apparently she saw no strangeness in it, and was not alarmed by the solitude, which she accepted as a matter of course. There was a way across the marsh to the meadows by which we had arrived; and a path led also from this clearing to the sea-shore. But that her grandfather knew, and he would be able to conduct us. As for

herself—she glanced at her leg and a slight colour emerged in her face.

It seemed then that we were destined to remain there, prisoners of the marsh, until nightfall, and there was nothing for it but to put a good face on the situation. I will confess I was devoured by impatience, for I knew not what delay might bring forth. I wondered if it would be possible to follow the path to the shore without guidance, but the Breton girl shook her head, indicating that it was full of dangers. I went out to explore, and spent some time questing for the outlet. When I returned the door was shut, and I rapped on it before entering. At the table a girl faced me, in the Breton costume, her hair in a blue coif, and a blue neckerchief about her bosom. To my astonishment I recognised Miss Lovell, who greeted me with a blushing smile. She stood up in her short skirts, and she was Breton to the very clogs upon her feet. A giggle came from the cripple, and she came out of the corner in which she had been harbouring. I saw what had happened. My charge had adroitly seized the opportunity of my absence to change her dress. She had the air of awaiting my approval and I gave it to the full.

"You are like one to the habit born," I told her, and made her turn so that no detail of the picturesque costume should escape my notice.

"She is very kind, Mr. Kerslake, and oh so quick to understand," she explained. "She seemed to guess at once that we were being pursued. And," she paused, exhibiting some embarrassment. "Will you—would you—I have no money with me. Could you lend me something to pay her with?"

It was delightful to feel her dependent on me, and to realise that she came to me so confidently. That precious intimacy thrilled me through and through. The girl seemed astonished at what I gave her, and laughed her pleasure. She put her head to one side, and scrutinised Miss Lovell critically. Then she nodded, and put one hand on her own breast and one on Miss Lovell's. Evidently she wished to approve the resemblance in the costumes.

But for all I was glad that my companion should have a rest, the interruption of our flight irked me. It wanted many hours to the return of the grandfather, and I could not guess what was happening to the other principals in this adventure. Where was Alston? And was Rudgwick idle?

I succeeded in tracing the trail some distance through the marsh, but found myself at a loss when it branched, and reluctantly returned to the clearing. When I arrived I caught the sound of voices, one of which was clearly a man's: and

so instead of going straight to the hut I wandered round to the back, and glanced in at a window. What I saw was a short dark lean man in gesticulation with the Breton girl. The savour of the sea clung about him, and I could have sworn he was a Dago; of a certainty he was an emissary from Rudwick or Butterfield. I kept in hiding and awaited developments, ready for any emergency. It was at once obvious that the girl and he were not making any progress in their lingual communication. He spoke what seemed to be Italian, and dropped occasionally into broken English, which fact added to my conviction, as to his identity. Sylvia Lovell was in a chair nearby, and it pleased my heart to see how she took this incursion, she who must have guessed at the character of the visitor. She had the Breton girl's sewing in her hands, and made an admirable feint of working on it, now and then casting an interested glance at the spy.

His patience at last appeared to have reached its end, or he had determined on bold courses, for he stepped forward and touched Miss Lovell roughly on the arm. She rose and indignantly uttered a few sentences, and they were nothing but gibberish. With her brisk intelligence and courage she was playing the part of Breton.

The man had evidently doubts, for he stepped back, and I heard his broken English.

"Mees, escape—runaway from school."

Sylvia shook her head, glanced at the Breton girl, and smiled. She walked across to the girl, and linked her arm in hers.

"*Sœurs!*" she said. " *Ma sœur!*"

The Breton girl smiled back and patted her shoulder affectionately entering into the play; and the Dago looked crestfallen. The cripple made a motion as of one cutting down bushes, and then of one binding withies into bundles, and at that his rout was apparent. After all what real reason would he have to suspect either of two Breton girls domestically engaged in an osier cutter's cottage, when he was on the search for a fugitive English girl in deshabille and an attendant squire?

He shrugged his shoulders, spread out his hands by way of apology, and left the hut. I saw him go by the path on which we had come, and the reeds closed about him.

The grandfather arrived about six o'clock, a withered berry of a man, and conducted us across the swamp with mechanical fidelity. It was no great way, we found, to the sea-shore, but the path he took was more protracted, leading as it did towards a hamlet on the outskirts. This lay a little back from the shore, badly placed on rising ground, and commanding a prospect of the Bay. Yet we were not destined to make

acquaintance with that village, as you shall hear.

We came out of the plantation of osiers into a marshy stretch of sand and quagmire, and below us was the great green water of the Atlantic, breaking on the beach. A little distance away my expert eye recognised a small craft low-down as a yawl, and I could swear it was no other than my boat come round from Cherbourg in obedience to Alston's orders. In that case our course was clear; she had arrived in the nick of time, and we had only to hail her to reach security. As I gazed in this vein of speculation, with a rising heart, my glance was intercepted by something in the middle distance, and I was aware of a figure coming along the shore at a quick rate. The old man, laden with our unintelligible thanks and something more material, had left us and re-entered the swamp, and we had set out along the foreshore. The figure now broke into a run toward us.

I had no longer suspicions merely; I knew now that here was Rudgwick again, Rudgwick the inevitable, the ineluctable. Well, if his emissary ventured he ventured at his peril, for the revolver rested, pregnant with doom, in my coat-pocket. Nevertheless it was no part of my design to be involved in an unnecessary conflict, however much these ruffians deserved a violent end, and

so I quickened my pace, and we began to go towards the sea in a fine rush of sea-wind. Miss Lovell, now a veritable Breton girl, flashed along beside me gallantly, the sun lending colour to the blue of her coif and bodice. The man behind came on running.

The yawl rose and dipped in the swell, and I thought I could pick out a figure or two aboard. I shouted, waved my cap and endeavoured in other ways to attract the attention of the crew. Presently we happened upon a stick on the beach, and on this I placed my coat and let it flap dramatically in the air for some moments. It seemed to me that one of the forms aboard the yawl had come to a pause, and was staring. I renewed my efforts.

The man behind had now dropped to a walk, and was less than a hundred paces away. I turned and gave him my attention. It was the tall, lean, cadaverous, pock-marked fellow with gaps in his teeth who had shadowed me on that first evening from Bembridge, and who, I could swear, had been involved in the abduction of the girl beside me.

"Do you see that man," I asked. "Have you seen him before?"

She looked and shook her head. "No," said she. "Why?" and then her fears renewed. "Is it—oh, is it one of that man's creatures?" she said piteously.

"Never fear," said I grimly. "He's not going to interfere with you, whoever he may be. He has a gallows look, has he not? What do you think of him?"

The fellow was now but twenty paces away, and came on deliberately with his hands in his trouser pockets, and a cold fishy eye upon us. We had stopped as if to await him, and that appeared to disconcert him. I stared at him as if he were an animal rather than a human being, and continued my remarks overtly.

"In our country, Miss Lovell, they'd hang such men on sight," I said. "But over yonder they turn 'em loose on simple citizens. Mark you his sinister eyebrows, and the set of those huge ears. His complexion is perfect gallows."

The man, who must have heard, displayed signs of embarrassment at this usage, and moved along the beach away from us slowly. It was evident that he had orders only to follow us, not to molest us. We resumed our way, and I tied a white handkerchief to the stick, and as we proceeded made signals according to the naval code. I knew that if it were the yawl and the master were aboard he would, as an old quartermaster, recognise them. So we marched on slowly waving, and our spy at a parallel with us, but nearer the water's edge.

My attention now was engrossed by the yawl,

on which I detected some movement, and it was a cry from my companion that gave me the alarm.

"Look, oh look!" she cried, clutching my arm, and I turned about towards the swamp from which we had emerged to see a party of several men advancing from it swiftly. The Dago, then had not been deceived, or, if he had, someone with more intelligence and imagination had understood. The danger was imminent, and it was no occasion for dignified appearances. I seized Miss Lovell's hand and began to run.

Tall, slim and lithe-limbed she sped like Atalanta along the yellow sands; we ran like two children together, hand in hand, and with all the abandon and precipitation of the young. Away on my left the cadaverous spy also had started to run. I was making for the turn of the coast which gave access, according to our recent guide, to the group of cottages. It was our only chance, if I expected actual fighting, of which I did not yet know the possibilities. These were soon to be revealed to me. There was no noise in the pursuit, nor did we waste our breath on our voices; so that the whole affair was conducted in silence, until the final and unexpected outbreak.

It was not until we had been running some time that I perceived a boat tossing on the water half way between shore and yawl, and now I



**"The figure in the bow raised his arm and the magazine rifle  
answered to his finger"**

— — — — —

knew that my signals had been interpreted. The pursuers also saw the boat, and redoubled their exertions to catch up with us, gaining on us considerably. The girl was fleet of foot, but the pace was too fast to endure. She breathed heavily and faltered. The lank spy was loping along the margin of the water, and then, of a sudden he too espied the boat. It was close in now, and a man was standing in the bows.

Crack! The unexpected report of a rifle reverberated and came up the flat shore. The spy ducked and turned, and dashed vehemently away from the sea's edge inland. Crack! the rifle spoke again, and the sand went up in a spray at the foot of the foremost of the pursuers. He paused, and then a voice shouted. Crack! Again the smoke of the sand arose, and the figure in the bow of the boat dropped the weapon from his shoulder to watch. The whole party had now come to a standstill, and the spy had joined them. They seemed to take counsel together, and then made another advance as the boat beached with a rasping sound. The figure in the bows raised his arm and the magazine rifle answered to his finger. The foremost of the men clapped his hand to his shoulder with an oath, and once more they came to a pause.

Miss Lovell and I were still running, but slowly now, across the intervening space of sand towards

the boat. Behind us arose an outcry, and glancing over my shoulder I recognised the figure of Rudgwick and I thought I could hear his sharp dominant voice, with the edge of decision.

A volley of shots ensued from our hunters, and pattered against the boat. Alston, tall, cool, and debonair as ever, raised his arm once again, without a word. The rifle barked twice, and one of Rudgwick's pirates staggered and swung round. Miss Lovell and I reached the boat breathlessly and were helped aboard. I looked back. A hundred yards away was the group on the shore, staring after us infuriate and sullen, but helpless. Only Rudgwick had moved; and it was to snatch a pistol from one of his followers. He aimed it towards us. Alston smiled.

"Wilson," he observed pleasantly, "couldn't hit a man o' war at a hundred yards. He's bully on a deal, but he's no good at the trigger end of a gun."

Rudgwick must have realised this himself, for he suddenly threw down the weapon contemptuously and walked down to the shore. We were fifty yards out, being pulled against a fresh sea. Clad in a blue reefer suit, with nautical brass buttons, he gazed after us coolly enough. He had lost, but he was not going to make a fuss about it; he was a good gambler, was Wilson Rudgwick.

"Say, Fordyce," he called across the water and

through the wind. "That second curtain's fine; it's a real spicy second act, come to think of it. But this piece ain't finished, Fordyce, and don't you mistake. It's up to me now."

Alston smiled from his place in the bow, and looked at me smiling. It struck me oddly that he had not looked at Miss Lovell since we had been bundled unceremoniously into the boat.

## CHAPTER XI

### THE MIST

But with the relaxation of the tension his thoughts turned, and no doubt converged upon her. He put out his arm and made her comfortable where she sat.

"That better?" he asked in his sympathetic way, and as if he addressed a child, with a certain humourous tenderness, "little Bo-beep has lost her sleep, I can see from those large eyes. Never mind, Sylvia girl, we've got the laugh on him now."

Once more he turned his smiling eyes landward, to where Rudgwick was walking back to his men. It was a queer way of expressing himself, but I was becoming infurred to such locutions. And after all we had "the laugh" on Rudgwick, if we felt in a mood to laugh. I did not; nor, I fancy, did Miss Lovell. Excitement had not died out of her face; she threw out her hand eventually, and seized his arm.

"Shall we escape?" she asked eagerly.

"We're going to have a good try," he replied complacently. I do not think it occurred to her

to doubt him, for he had that masterful air of which I have spoken, and it was enhanced in some mysterious way by his general air of being a dandy out for a holiday. Alston gave me his attention again.

"I was much obliged for that note, Kerslake," said he. "It wouldn't have suited me to run against Rudgwick then. I acknowledge that was a good notion of his, to spread his net right away for us, and it would have come off if it hadn't been for you. I waited until I calculated you were overdue, and then returned along the road, but when I came upon the car's track and saw it wheel about, I guessed it was all up. Our name's mud, said I, and mud it was for a time."

"What have you been doing?" I asked.

"Oh, I lay low enough. What was I to do with no boat? Only sit and crack my fingers on the rocks, and wish the yawl was a turbine steamer. I tell you, Kerslake, I was done when I saw the schooner clear out to sea, but why Wilson came back to-day is more than I can assimilate."

"The yawl has only just turned up?" I inquired.

"That's so; she's not exactly blood stock, but she'll serve; and since yachts don't disappear into space I reckoned we'd got a chance of running down Wilson."

We had reached the yawl by this time, and he

assisted Miss Lovell aboard; and presently we three were together in the comfortable little cabin.

"Say, Sylvia, but this is smaller quarters than the *Mermaid*, remarked Alston smiling.

She shuddered. "I hate all ships," she said.

"Oh, well, we'll move her along," said Alston agreeably. "She won't take such a long time to make Plymouth, Kerslake? This man of yours McCulloch seems a cloudy sort of fellow."

"He's as honest as the skin between his brows," I said

"That may be," he assented. "But I reckon he's got a lot to learn. He's full of difficulties—he's a conventionalist, like a damn sea-lawyer, who thinks you hire him to point out that you can't do things. You'll have just to sweep his mind up a bit."

At that moment there was a rap on the door, which opened to admit McCulloch himself, an elderly stiff and somewhat dour figure of a man.

"You will excuse me, Sir," said he. "But do I understand previous orders to hold?"

"No, I guess not," answered Alston, "and I think you might have cudgelled that out for yourself, Captain, without doing any harm to speak of to your brains. We've got what we want, aboard, and we make tracks for Plymouth. Let her go, Mr. McCulloch; spread her wings; let's see her for a high flyer."

McCulloch saluted, and then stood to attention.

"Excuse me, Sir, are you aware that one of the hands came aboard wounded?" he asked austerey.

"Damned if I didn't think Wilson bagged someone," said Alston pleasantly. "Say, who's it, and what's it, Captain?"

"John Mellish, in the fore-arm, Sir."

"That isn't hurting much," commented Alston musingly. "That's not going to scare us any. Send him along and I'll doctor him, Captain. Smacks of old Montana times," he remarked with his winning smile at us.

McCulloch, looking as if he had something else to impart, went reluctantly, and Alston continued:

"I dropped one of Wilson's in response, and there was more than one scared; so we'll call it even. I didn't want to go to extremes, but they pushed me. I thought the dust would have stopped 'em, and so it would if it hadn't been for Wilson. Sylvia, I guess you want some refreshment." His gaze comprehensively took her in. "If it hadn't been for Kerslake's signals, I should have let you pass. How should I recognise you in that fig? Gracious, Sylvia, you're handsomer than any they raise as real Bretons; and you look like a fancy-dress queen."

The colour flowed into her cheeks, for she was fast recovering her composure, and beginning to resume, as it were, a normal life; and Alston's

very matter-of-fact manner and his easy talkativeness helped her to regain assurance. He brought out a bottle of wine and some food, and we made a brief repast, for it was by now moving towards dusk. The yawl was under weigh, and marched very well through the big seas, headed for the northern waters of the Bay. When Alston had dressed the wounded man's arm he came aft to us and sat down against the bulwarks and smoked lazily. He was in a contented mood, as became the victor, and he was disposed to be ruminantly reminiscent.

"What I don't understand is Wilson's return," he said. "I took it that he was making for the Mediterranean to give you folks a little yachting; and I was figuring out to run across to Marseilles as soon as I'd put the yawl on the trail. Wilson gave me the direct office about the Mediterranean, and I know when he's talking straight."

"Neither Miss Lovell nor myself was in the schooner," I told him, and he stared in surprise.

"Say, now where?" he demanded.

I related our story, and he listened with interest. When I had done he put a hand soothingly on Miss Lovell's arm in just a nice reassuring way. I am perfectly aware that it was that, but I hated it, and my heart leapt when she winced. Once more in my heart flowed the glory of the morning, that dawn when I had made my wonderful dis-

covery. And I came out of my ecstasy to hear Alston's level voice.

"Wilson gave away nothing. When he came to me——"

"He came to you?" I interrupted.

"Well, yes. I lay low in the village yonder, with my wits about me, you may be sure. And Wilson came along the day after you were taken. He invited me to a conference; said he didn't want fighting much, that he was for peace, and offered his terms." Alston gave me a glance in the falling dusk and paused. "But I wasn't bartering any about a woman, let alone a woman I love, and so we didn't deal."

"He offered to surrender Miss Lovell on certain terms?" I asked.

"That's so," said he indifferently as to expression, but I could see even in the growing gloom the glint of his resolute eyes. "Terms," he added, "which Miss Lovell would have repudiated indignantly, if I know anything of her spirit."

He glanced at her affectionately. "Yes, yes," she cried quickly. "I would not trust that man at all."

The remark was not quite relevant, and certainly did not cover the situation; but, poor girl, she was impulsive, and as illogical as her sex is ever, and she had been through a trying time. All that emerged to me in that conversation was that

Alston had refused to make concessions in his Montana mines which would have released Sylvia Lovell. I had already appreciated his stubborn character, but to sacrifice a girl to business—! I experienced a sense of indignation; so much so that I got up and went forward where the sail was drawing freely. McCulloch stood in the waist directing operations; and gave me a brief questioning glance.

"McCulloch," said I presently. "When can you fetch Plymouth?"

He turned the matter over before replying, and then said,

"I wouldn't like to enter into a contract about it, Sir, but—the question is, shall we fetch Plymouth?" he ended abruptly and drily.

"What do you mean?"

He nodded towards the stern. "As we came round the corner that schooner was setting her sails. Now, Mr. Kerslake, I don't know your secrets, and I don't want to. But seems to me pretty evident that there's something between you and that schooner. I can't shut my eyes, and one of my men's shot. Also there's a wounded man, I hear, on the beach there. That's nothing to do with me except to do my duty and report injury to one of my hands in obeying owner's orders. That's for Mr. Alston to explain. But when I see you running away from a schooner, and that

schooner clothing herself fore and aft with all speed, I can put two and two together, and I ask—are we going to get to Plymouth?"

"It is true," I answered. "The owner of the schooner kidnapped this young lady on the eve of her marriage. You cannot wonder that Mr. Alston has exhibited violence."

"Seemed a nice-spoken mild gentleman coming along," observed McCulloch dryly.

"We don't always show what we feel, McCulloch," I replied. "And as regards your fears, you forget the darkness. The schooner has no chance of finding us by night, not knowing our destination."

"That may be, Sir, and again it mayn't. But that schooner is a small craft that sails two foot to our one, and I've no fancy to be on a dark road with a pistol at my back."

Alston joined us just at this point, and inquired what interested us.

"Well," said he, on learning from me. "I pat Mr. McCulloch on the back for a good guesser. We don't want that pistol you talk of, and we're not going to have it. No doubt Rudgwick will look up his map and he'll find Quiberon or Quimper there, and a rail-head. Well, if he's shrewd he'll guess we go there, but he won't know for certain. Suppose the yawl lands us there, and stands off, eh? Wilson's got to put a party ashore at

Quiberon to make certain, and to stand along after the yawl. That'll make him sick. And perhaps we'll be in neither yawl nor Quiberon nor Quimper." He laughed. "Let her go, Captain. We'll fix that up."

When I got back to the stern Miss Lovell was still there. A beautiful night was developing about us. The yawl breasted the sea quietly, and the water was awash below the sprit in a lather of foam. The bay was full of rough water, though the sky was clear, scattered only with wisps of cloud under the falling breeze. Yet we footed it at a good pace, and the air enwrapped us with delicious coolness. The stars shone in the sea, broken into shivers of light.

"Comfortable?" I asked her.

"Yes, and oh so tired," she answered; and then sat up against the bulwarks, as if by an effort she pulled herself together. "Mr. Kerslake, I must thank you more than I can say for all your goodness to me," she began quickly. "Although I'm a—although I have no claim on you you have gone to no end of trouble for me, and run dangers. I do feel grateful, believe me."

"My reward is your release," I said somewhat awkwardly.

"It is so good of you to think so," she replied firmly.

"But I know how inadequate it is and—and—"

she paused. "I'm very sorry for being so ungracious to you at Bessenton."

My thoughts swung back over what seemed a life-time. She was all but a stranger to me when I had made my impertinent suggestion, and now I seemed to know her familiarly, with sweet intimacy, and it was only a week ago.

"You were not ungracious," I said; "it was I who was abominably meddlesome."

After a moment she said in a low voice: "You have meddled to good purpose."

"Had I had any hint from Mr. Alston of the situation between him and Rudgwick I might have interfered earlier and to better advantage," I said. She looked her question. "I saw Rudgwick's ruffians about the Manor when I called and saw you."

"You could not guess," she said, "nor I, nor anyone. Oh I don't understand it. Mr. Alston says it's something about mines, but they don't do such things, do they, Mr. Kerslake?" she asked pitifully. "What have I got to do with their mines?"

"I take it that you were stolen as a hostage," I explained; "you were to be the lever used to bring pressure to bear on Mr. Alston. It's a queer idea of business, I must confess, and I don't think it would stand any chance of flourishing over here. It's taking a leaf out of the brigand's book. You were practically held to ransom."

"I've heard of that being done in America," she said, "but I thought it was only ruffians and thieves who stole people in that way."

"That's what we call them," I said, "but we've a good deal to learn from America apparently."

"Oh!" she cried. "I can see that dreadful man's face now, as he came into the room." She shuddered. "I had no time; they just seized me, without ceremony, or saying a word; and what could I do? Not even cry out in those lonely roads with any hope of being heard."

Certainly Rudgwick had managed well, and that by the directest means, which was in keeping with his blunt, arrogant character. He wanted his hostage, and he went the shortest way to get her, which consisted of open kidnapping from a lonely hill-side. His yacht lay off the shore, and an hour would suffice to carry out his whole plan. It was simplicity itself. As I turned the matter over in my mind Miss Lovell's head fell back a little, and her dress rustled into silence. She was dead tired, and had fallen asleep; and there I sat within a few feet of her listening to the rip of the waves and the wind in the canvas, and watching her fair face emerge from the shadows in the light of the rising moon. Presently Alston approached from his conference with McCulloch, and ere he reached her began on the tender pitch of his voice "Well, Sylvia, do you think you could do with a—"

Then seeing that she slept he stopped, and looked down on her. Her face was beautiful, and took on even a greater beauty from the pallor of the moonshine. But Alston gazed without any expression on his face. From where I lay quiet I could see his handsome features, the square shoulders, the luxuriant moustache; and those smiling and elusive eyes were silent now, significant of nothing. At least that is how they appeared to me, but it may be that the nocturnal light was too meagre to reveal all the truth. He turned away after some moments of observation and crossed to me.

"Awake?" he asked, and on hearing plumped down beside me. "I reckon this is better than the cabin," he remarked. "I think I'll leave Miss Lovell where she is." He went on without waiting for an answer. "Know this part any, Kerslake?"

I said I had a slight acquaintance with the coast about Brest.

"Oh well, maybe that'll come in useful a bit later, but I'd like to know what sort of figure the land cuts about here. Say, that schooner McCulloch says can beat us two to one."

"I should trust to his estimate," I answered.

"If that's so," said he reflectively "we've got to fix up something in a little. This blamed moon's up against us."

Instinctively we looked over the taffrail to the crescent in the sky. The yawl left a wake of dancing gold behind us, which melted into a horizon of luminous darkness.

"See that?" he inquired, touching my shoulder.

"Yes; she's on our trail," I assented; "what else did you expect?"

"Knowing Wilson Rudgwick, nothing," he declared musingly; "he's a bulldog on his fancy, is Wilson, and he has the bulge of us now, or ought to have. How's the wind?"

"Dropping," said I.

Alston rose quickly and peered out towards the land on our port starboard. "I guess we'll keep in a bit," he said, and went forward to the master.

The yawl made her board wider and crept towards the rocks, but she had small way on her now in the falling wind. Alston came back and sat down.

"Seem's cheerful on the whole," he observed; "suggests a garrulous circle of tale-spouters. Fire away, Kerslake."

I paid no heed to this, for I was watching the speck on the twilit sea which was the schooner, and Alston followed my example. When I shifted my gaze, his was bent on the deck, and his lower jaw protruded, as one sunk in profound thought. The cold moon was full upon the still

face of the girl at rest upon her unpromising couch.

Alston got up and went forward again and presently I heard my name. I followed him, joining company with McCulloch and himself in the bows.

"Say, Kerslake," he greeted me in a brusque voice of contempt, "this fool man says he won't put in yonder."

"It's more than I dare," said the honest sailor sullenly, "I've no charts to this coast. I'll take her in anywhere 'twixt the Lizard and the Fore-land, and 'twixt Hull and Thames estuary. But I will be damned if I run her on an unknown coast. It's not worth my neck, nor no one's."

"He's right," said I to Alston. "It's a great risk."

Alston made a gesture of impatience. "God's sakes, man we're taking risks all the time on this cruise; we're bound to take risks. There she comes beating along up, for us, and, by the Lord, she'll have us in two turns if we keep on this lay. We've got to go in, Captain, and that's an end of it."

McCulloch was obstinately and perhaps wisely silent, and in that silence the sail flapped. An idea came to me.

"McCulloch," said I, "what'll she do in light airs?"

"Keep on leeway," said he bluntly.

"Which is all the schooner will do, I've a notion," I said. "And it looks to me not so much light airs as a dead calm we're going to have."

Both men started, and McCulloch bent over the bow-sprit.

"You're about right, sir," he said. "She's not making a foot."

"Well," said I, "then where's the schooner?"

Alston clapped my shoulder cheerfully. "By gum, we'll see it through at that," he declared. "We'll keep her at her distance till dawn, and who's afraid by day. This coast's too populous for hazards in daylight."

Thus our spirits rose in the calm, and we all went about with better heart. Even the hands, who had necessarily become acquainted with the vendetta between the two Americans, entered into the relief. After all it is human nature to take part in a conflict, even if it be not your own, with zest and our jocund red-faced sailor ventured to offer me his congratulations and his encouragement.

"They're done, Sir; that's what they are. This was their only chance, and now they've lost it. They won't get no other; you can bet on that."

Here then again we were winning, and once more Rudgwick failed with his very finger on his prey. But after all no one of us knew Rudgwick

as Alston knew him and confessed that he knew him. There was a certain frank admiration of Rudgwick in Alston's genial criticism of the Chicago operator.

It might have been half an hour after midnight when I, who had fallen into an uneasy doze, was awakened by the burly sailor.

"Excuse me, Sir," there's a rowing boat coming up yonder," his hoarse voice muttered.

I started up, and instantly shook Alston, who responded with a stare, and sat a hand to his pocket instinctively.

"A boat!"

He scrambled to his feet. "A boat! By Heaven, Wilson's got the crawl on me after all." His voice was like the explosion of a bleak wind. He ran to the taffrail; and in the glooming trail of the yawl's lights, at a distance of some half a mile could be plainly discerned a boat tossing on the lessening seas.

Alston stood for a moment impassive in all but his features which worked vaguely in the dark. Then his suave voice had come back to him.

"When Wilson's in for a corner he don't go to sleep. I did, and my name's mud. But it's some time since I had a go with him, and so maybe I can be excused." He turned. "Mr. Kerslake, would you be so good as to help get out a boat. We'll play pawn for pawn."

He walked to where Miss Lovell lay and bent over to wake her. I hastened to obey his directions, and McCulloch, the big sailor, Drake, and I set out the boat. In two minutes Alston appeared at the side with Miss Lovell, looking alarmed and still mazed with sleep, and within two minutes we were launched in the twilight, and were pulling for the loom of the land, which was here some two miles away.

Drake, Alston, another hand and myself were at the oars, and Miss Lovell sat in the stern, a tiller in her hand which she was too frightened as yet to use. We had not got a quarter of a mile away when a shout over the water informed us that we were seen.

"Pull Devil—pull tailor," said Alston with a laugh. "We're tailors for the nonce."

We bent to the sculls, and the little skiff lurched along the face of the waters. The sea had gone down, and now came only in a long oily swell which had the appearance of carrying us into the shore. But Rudwick's boat, we might be sure, was more heavily manned, and it was clear that we should be hard put to it to reach land first; and even if we succeeded in the feat I wondered what would then befall. Would that obstinate and unscrupulous pursuer consent to stop short of his quarry? Certainly there was the prospect of bloodshed in our immediate purview. I felt for

my revolver, as I came up to the stroke. Alston's back was just before me, and his broad shoulders swung to the rhythm of the pull.

"A strong pull, boys," said he. "We're not done yet."

"Are you armed?" I asked across his shoulder.

"You bet," he threw back jauntily, even recklessly. "It may come to a brush yet, Kerslake."

It had every appearance of that, and I do not know that I was reluctant. Indignation at the cowardly expedient by which a young girl had been dragged into this intrigue as a pawn made my blood boil at the thought of Rudgwick. If it came to bloodshed I swore I would answer for him; and from what I had seen of Alston, I could depend on his nerve and his marksmanship.

We had made over half a mile, and the shore was still a long way off, while the enemy was gaining slowly. This we could only gather from the sounds, for the surface of the sea at a little distance was veiled in a film of mist. Suddenly Drake, who was behind me, leaned forward and whispered with his great unruly voice in my ears, and his whisper was audible through the boat.

"This'll trick 'em, Sir. Look over yonder."

I looked, and saw what he meant. The black cape of the land which had been visible when we started was now involved in mere obscurity. Blackness had picked itself out before, whereas

now it was lost in the mass of lesser darkness that marked the horizon landwards. I looked up, and the multitude of the stars had vanished. Only the crescent shone weakly through a pale gold dust. The mist was settling down.

And now it descended fast enough, dropping on the water like a pall; so much so that by a common impulse we ceased rowing. The sound of the other boat reached us faintly.

"Whew!" said Drake, mopping his wet forehead. Alston sat motionless, listening, and then: "We can take it easy, I reckon," he remarked coolly. "But let's get along."

We dipped and continued our course, and for the next ten minutes there was silence. The fog drew in.

"This is a little bit too much," I said. "We could do with half this."

"Do you reckon we're going right?" asked Alston.

"I think it's guess-work," I said.

He paused on his oar, as did we all, and in the pause the noise of other oars was audible.

"They're adrift then," said I. "We're making much the same course, if it's any satisfaction."

I don't know but I'd sooner get away from them," said Alston dryly. "Let's shove her along again."

Our voices must have carried in the fog, for

there was evidently an increase of effort on the part of the pursuers. We could hear the sculls dip more quickly, and a voice which I could recognise as Rudgwick's spoke curtly in command.

We redoubled our exertions, from time to time pausing to listen, and presently we heard no more —nothing save the wash and roll of the sea about us.

"It's time we struck the shore somewhere, Sir," said Drake into my ear.

"The point is, did we keep her nose straight. If only we could see the stars!"

"Say, Kerslake," said Alston briskly. "Are you certain about this course?"

"I have as much notion as you," I answered. "It's all a chance. We've thrown 'em off, that's all our luck. But if we kept right we should be near in. Whose ears are sharpest? Does anyone hear any breakers? The noise of waves tumbling ashore is quite different from the wash at sea."

We all strained our ears, but could hear nothing beyond the under-droning of the ocean.

"We can only go on," I told Alston.

"That's all right," said he cheerfully. "We'll go on; and the first man that hears the shore speak up."

We rowed on for twenty minutes longer, by which time it was certain that we had deviated

from our course. The fog lay grosser than ever, and Alston's back had almost faded from my view. Miss Lovell was still in the stern, tiller in hand, but she said no word, and she was swallowed in the darkness.

Drake suddenly checked his oar. "I hear something, Sir," he whispered. I listened. Certainly there was a new sound, but it was not the shore speaking. What was it?

As we waited, wondering, a voice pierced the gloom, but we could not hear the words.

"We've run into them," exclaimed Alston.

"No, by Jove!" I said. "It's no boat. I know it now. It's the water on the hull. We must be quite close up."

"The yawl!" cried Alston. "Lay her along. Damme, we'll have the laugh of them yet. We get back home, and the Lord he knows where they are. I'll drink Wilson's health."

He chuckled, and the men dipped their oars. Two strokes fetched us alongside, and we pitched in the darkness against a black hull. But at the first sight I saw our mistake. This was not the yawl. It was—

"Hush, man, hush," I said as Drake began his loud whisper. "It's the *Mermaid!*" and I communicated my news to Alston.

"Say, that so?" he whispered back eagerly, and was silent.

And now a voice came from the darkness beyond.

"I heard the boat plain, over yonder."

"Anyone there?" called a second voice, which I recognised. It was Butterfield's. We kept silence; then Alston leaned back to me.

"There's a light aft; they're coming this way. How many do you reckon as being aboard?"

"He may have as many as ten," said I.

"Do they keep watches?" said he.

"Yes."

"Say, Kerslake, we're going to take this schooner," he remarked in his even voice.

"Take it!" I echoed in a whisper.

"Yes. I guess we can surprise 'em in this darkness. They won't know where we are, nor where they are themselves. Here comes the light."

"It will reach us," I said. "If you're game then, I'm with you!"

I rose in the boat, whispered to Drake, and pulled myself up over the bulwarks on to the deck. I made the painter fast as the man with the light reached me. He moved along the bulwarks, throwing his lantern seawards at each step, and as he made his last step I caught him. The light went down with a crash, and I had one hand over his mouth ere he could shout or cry. The resistance he made was feeble, and I felt in my mind that it was Butterfield.

"Got him? Bully!" said Alston in my ears, setting the lantern up. "We'll secure him first, and then go on to the others."

Drake and the other hand had by now reached the deck, leaving Miss Lovell in the boat, which was safely made fast to the schooner. We gave our pursuer into their custody, and armed with the lantern proceeded to investigate.

It was difficult to find one's way in the fog, but we scrambled aft clumsily, after running into several obstacles, and were brought up by a hail.

"That you, Mr. Butterfield?" asked a coarse voice. "Located that boat?"

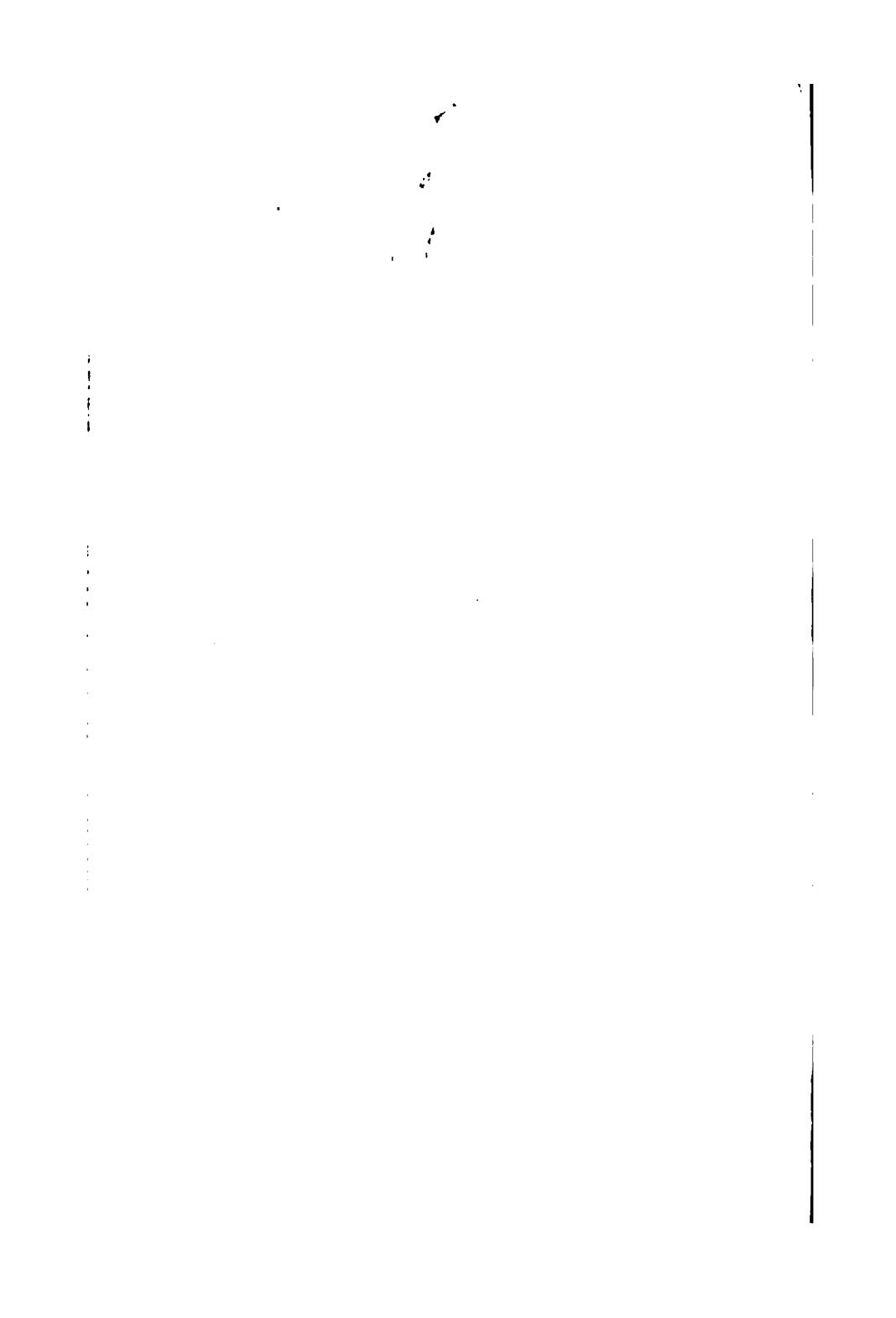
For answer I handed the lantern to Alston who was close behind us, and took a step in the direction of the speaker. I caught him round the neck at the second try, and threw him. I had imagined the job would be easy, but I was disagreeably surprised. It seemed a fat and bloated body beneath me, but it wriggled and turned and struggled like an octopus. With the utmost difficulty did I keep my position of vantage, for I was several times in danger of being rolled round by the sheer force of this porpoise. At last he ceased to resist, and breathed heavily.

"Right," said he. "You're top-dog—I recognise—who the Devil may you be?"

"How many men are aboard?" I growled into his ear.



**"With the utmost difficulty did I keep my position of vantage"**



He puffed. "You Alston?" he gasped. "Well, it's not my night out. All right. Top-dog has it. Nine all told."

"The rest—?" I questioned.

"The boss has got a boat load, and there's some went by land to Quimper or somewhere."

Alston whistled. "Wilson's got his cards out," he commented. "Say, take your knee out of my insides," suggested the fellow. I relaxed my pressure. "Two on you," he went on, "I reckon I'm done this round. All serene, sonny."

"How many below?" I asked.

He considered. "Seven," he returned.

If that were so we had accounted for the others, and our risk diminished. Alston and I exchanged whispers, and then we lifted our captive to his feet and made him march. We handed him over to the sentries, and returned. Within fifteen minutes of our boarding, we had the hatches clapped on, and the *Mermaid* was ours.

## CHAPTER XII

### THE MERMAID

I HAVE said we clapped the hatches on, but that is to speak in something of a figure. We must first secure the crew forward, which was effected by closing the entrance to the forecastle cabins and placing a sentry over it. But there remained the captain who, we gathered, had kept to his ship. She rode at anchor in the fog, like a wise vessel, and her lights broached the darkness, port, centre and stern. The skipper was evidently a prudent seaman; and he was now on our minds.

I had a full recollection of the after deck, and the luxurious little suite of cabins, and here no doubt the captain was berthed. We made our way cautiously to the wheel and began a systematic and silent search. The fog impeded this, but once we had the deck buildings under our hands we stuck to them. There was a small companion ladder which led, I remembered, into a saloon in miniature, but we had no use for that. It was the staterooms we wanted. I opened a door furtively and peered in while Alston flashed the lantern over my head. It was a bed-room,

and it was unoccupied. The next door I opened gave access to a small office; and a cabin, furnished as a bedroom also, opened off it. Undoubtedly these were Rudgwick's apartments. On this side there were no more cabins, and so we crept round to port. As the vague and misty light of the lantern streamed on a closed door here, I felt Alston's hand on my shoulder.

"Say," said he, "what's the matter with leaving things alone? If he's here he don't realise anything, and anyway he's only one man. Let's let up a bit, and consider."

"Very well," I whispered back after a pause, "I don't see why we shouldn't."

We retraced our steps, and got to where Drake and his companion guarded the prisoners.

"We must get Miss Lovell aboard," I said. "I suppose you mean taking this schooner along. That's your game?"

"I'll run her into Plymouth, by gosh," he said with a laugh. "Yes, let's get the little girl in."

I drew up the painter, and we assisted her on to the deck; after which I conducted her to the empty bedroom we had discovered on the starboard side.

"Rest now," said I encouragingly. "You'll be quite safe here."

"What are we going to do?" she asked in bewilderment.

"We've chartered a bigger vessel to sail home in; that's all," I said smilingly. "You'll soon see the Island again."

She sighed. "Thank you," she said simply, and sat down on the bunk. She seemed still in a maze and I saw that the best thing to do was to leave her to recover.

Outside I got a glimpse of a figure passing in the mist. It was Alston, and I knew by that the fog was thinning. I told him so. A distinct breath of air streamed out of the night.

"Can you lend a hand at the anchor?" I asked, and we went forward.

We got it up without much difficulty, and I was conscious that the nose of the schooner went about on the moving water. Her sails were spread on the foremast, and I braced the sheets. Then I took the wheel. She had a little way on her by now.

The fog was scattering fast, and I could see the deck house from where I stood. Suddenly a figure came round the corner, short and square and authoritative.

"Tilling," roared a voice. "She's under way. What the devil's this? Whose orders—"

I whistled shrilly, and Alston's tall figure loomed up. The mist slowly dissolving wreathed between the two forms. The shorter one vanished. Overhead I could see the stars, and the *Mer-*

*maid* keeled over on the port tack. Alston's face, white in the ethereal mist, was turned for a moment to me, and then he walked towards the deck house.

The whole deck now blew clear of the fog, and we stood stark in the eye of the dawn. I could see the mass of the land to starboard. The deck house glistened and Alston's athletic figure lurked behind it.

Round the corner again came the short form, and a revolver was in its hand. The light of dawn showed us the red face, up-turned nose and ferocious moustache of the skipper.

"Pirates is it, by God!" he bellowed, and raised his hand.

"That you, Jude?" said Alston coolly. "Damned if I mightn't have expected it. I've a bead on you."

Two reports sounded simultaneously; there was a rattling on the bulwarks behind Alston.

"Hands up, Jude," said Alston. "That was mere *cave*, the wind on your cheek. You know what to expect."

The skipper uttered an oath, and once more the two reports rang out, but Alston's, I judged, a little in advance. The weapon dropped from the captain's hand, and he seized his left wrist in his right hand.

"Damnation!" he roared like a bull with pain

and fury; the blood dripped from his trigger finger.

"I didn't want to bite," explained Alston calmly. "You ought to have known me, Jude." He walked up to the man, and took his hand, the smoke still issuing from his revolver, held negligently. "I'm a bit of a surgeon, Jude. I'll fix that. Damn it, man, why did you bring it on yourself? I've wrecked that knuckle."

At this stage my attention was diverted from the strange scene by the apparition of Miss Lovell who bore down on me wildly. No doubt she thought we were involved in a wholesale engagement.

"What is it? Oh, what is it?" she cried.

The wheel flew out of my hand, and I took her arm.

"It's over," I soothed her; "come back with me. It's really nothing."

Her gaze went to the bloody hand of the captain, where he stood, with a frown of rage and pain, and his storm of oaths; and she clung round my neck.

"Take me away, oh, take me away. I cannot bear it!" she entreated sobbing. "Take me away from this horrible—" She choked on the conclusion of her petition, and I led her gently back to the cabin, placing her on the bed.

"Rest assured, child," said I earnestly, "that nothing shall happen to you. I will not let anything happen to you."

She wept audibly, and I could do no more. I stroked her hair, and went back to the wheel which was kicking in idleness. Alston and the captain had vanished. Before me the blue-grey water of the Bay was illumined by the imminent dawn. A mile away was the yawl tossing at anchor. Our way would take us past her.

Alston made his appearance presently with Drake. "I've reasoned like a father with Jude," he said, "but his finger smarts; he won't listen to argument. Anyway, I've fixed him up with the other two in his cabin, and mounted guard. That saves us one, and we've got to get to Plymouth mighty short-handed!"

"Oh, we'll manage at a pinch," I remarked, giving a twist to the wheel, ere I gave it into Drake's hands.

"There's the yawl," I pointed out.

"Um . . . yes," he considered; "we might make up a man or two more, but to say the truth I don't like your McCulloch. He's too blamed conscientious; he's got too many scruples to go."

"I imagine we're in for it anyhow," I observed grimly.

He looked at me. "Well, I don't know. I wouldn't lay a lot on it. This is Wilson's funeral. He's got to square the accounts."

"Good Lord, man," said I. "There's one life gone, if not two, and some bloodshed."

"Wilson's got to foot the bill," he said calmly. "It's his order. I guess he's bought this crew, and they're just his. They've signed on, and can't go back on it."

"No, but the authorities may," I said dryly.

"I don't exactly know any authorities that are looking on," he returned as dryly. "This might be under the Jolly Roger for all the writ that runs here. Ah, you're Britisher, and that's why. Your King's writ runs everywhere, eh? Well, we don't take account of that our way. If we don't want a writ to run it doesn't. It stops dead, out of breath, or with a stitch, or something. I reckon," he added comfortably, "that Wilson's fixed it all up."

It was amazing to me, but then so much had been amazing that I had almost ceased to be staggered.

"Anyhow," I said, "our business is to get to Plymouth, where things can't happen, and where writs do run."

"That's so," he said, "as I've been explaining to Jude. But he's one of Wilson's toughs. Not the first time by a long way they've been in it together. Told me to go to Hell for company, but I'm not going before Jude or Wilson either." He smiled blandly and lit a cigar. "I guess we can pull it off, Kerslake," he continued. "I

look to you for seamanship. I don't know these sea things. The land's good enough for me."

"And a rifle too, I should say," I could not help adding.

"Yes," he said meditatively, and modestly, "I'm a fair shot. I learned that out Montana way. I flicked the locks of his hair to give him a hint, but he was too mad to take it. Jude was a fool. He knows me of old, but he was like a bull of Bashan. He lost his head; so I had to rap his knuckles. I guess that finger's gone. He won't bury it under his tombstone."

He smoked placidly while I digested this, and studied him. His glance was towards the yawl which we were rapidly approaching. It was not moving, for I could perceive what McCulloch's attitude would be. He would take us for Rudgwick's party, and in his honest and mulish British way would defy us to break the law. I do not believe that McCulloch thought that was possible, and if it should happen I am quite sure he confidently trusted to the visitations of the outraged law to restore the balance.

We had got within a quarter of a mile of the yawl when I made out a rowing boat hovering about it. Alston saw it also, and nudged me.

"I guess it's Wilson," he said and laughed. "He's had a wet night and a weary one. I'm in the mind to give him a signal."

He bade Drake put the schooner a point nearer, and went to the side. As we approached he took off his hat and waved it to the boat which was dancing towards us a hundred yards away. It was clear that Rudgwick thought his captain was come in search of him.

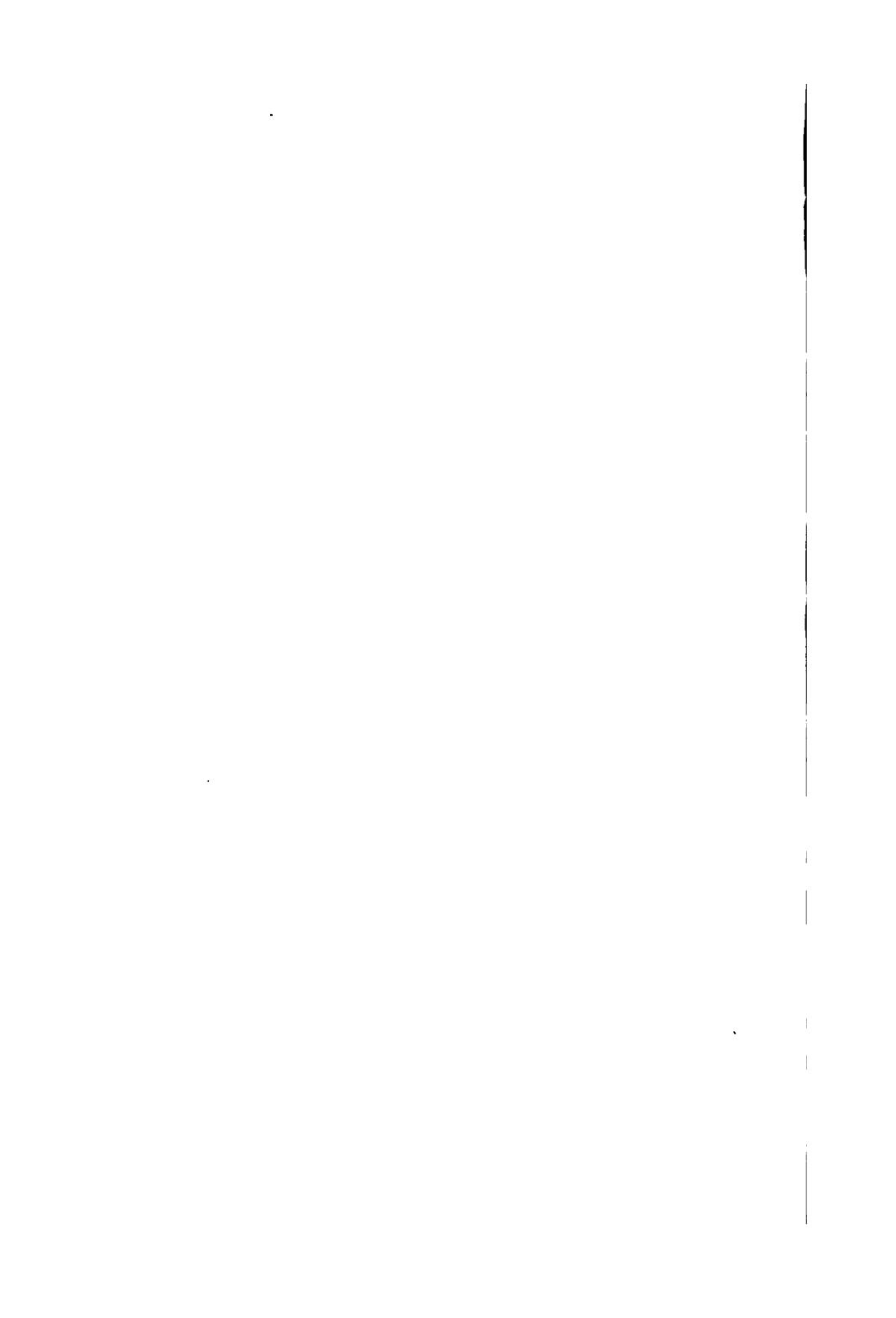
"Say, Wilson," shouted Alston in high feather, "say, can we give you a tow along?" The oars on the boat stopped confusedly, as if abruptly disconcerted by this astonishing discovery. "She's got pretty feet, this craft, Wilson," shouted Alston.

The blow must have fallen heavily, but to my eyes Rudgwick showed no signs of discomposure. His compact figure and square face were visible in the stern, and his gaze was directed on us steadily. The schooner swerved like a gull in response to the wheel, and passed within thirty yards of the tossing boat. The faces of the men were plain in their anger and amazement. They were marooned! Rudgwick opened his mouth at last. His prize had gone from him, and now his yacht was cut out under his nose. He was left, a figure of ridicule, in an open boat off a remote shore. If I had not any pity for him, which I certainly had not, I had a certain admiration for the way he met disaster.

"Well, you might trail a line, Fordyce, if you're not going far," said he; "I fixed up for a business



"He was left, a figure of ridicule, in an open boat"



cruise, but I'm not saying no to a little pleasure." Our schooner went by, Alston laughing. "Say, if you don't pile her up somewhere, you can hold her in trust for me, along with the girl," cried Rudgwick. Alston's teeth showed in a smile under his big moustache.

But in that exchange of stupid sallies I had other work to do. The hands were on the deck of the yawl, in evident excitement, and I ran to the deck-house for flags. As I did so I saw that the window of the Captain's cabin was thrust open, and Butterfield's head appeared through it. The attention of his guard was withdrawn to the boat and the sea, and Butterfield extended a hand and opened it three times. His dull sallow face glowed till it shone like silver. Rudgwick had not budged from his seat in the stern and was looking hard. This was all I saw as I went; and, having secured my flags, I made my signals. I had merely appointed a rendezvous for McCulloch in case of accidents. The significance of Butterfield's signals was to come.

Alston turned lightly to me as the boat receded into the distance.

"I guess that dishes Wilson," he remarked amiably, "that brings me even with him. And now we'll go along and get some food."

We investigated the schooner's larder and soon discovered provisions, together with a bottle of

wine. Rudgwick had fitted his yacht with all the necessaries and many of the extravagances of a millionaire; and for its tonnage the *Mermaid* was a model. We ate and drank a little, and then I took a trick at the wheel, and Alston mounted guard, while Drake and the other man, Stephenson, refreshed themselves. After that I looked into the cabin and found Miss Lovell sleeping, at length upon the bunk, in her pretty Breton dress, evidently worn out by her experiences and exhausted by her fears. Alston in his tireless way occupied himself with the papers in Rudgwick's office. He was in essence extremely restless, but he had acquired the art of outward composure, and I discovered him reading, sorting and rearranging, with an expression that conveyed nothing save the indifference of routine. It was not Rudgwick's sort of face; for that to me always suggested something sphinxine, something grim and saturnine. Alston's was the face of a very civil and agreeable gentleman.

Alston looked up pleasantly from his business-like employment. "We're through," he observed.

"You know your man," I answered, "I don't. But he seems very capable."

He interrupted his work of fingering the papers. "Oh, he's capable; he's more than that. He's got genius in a way. Here's the workings of

a brilliant operation I've just come upon." He tapped the papers under his hand. "Wilson gets to the horizon sometimes," he said approvingly. "I didn't think he'd got dash enough for this, but it appears he has."

Scuples had no place in the strange transactions between these men. The one stole the other's fiancée, and the other was willing to turn over his antagonist's private portfolio. I supposed that if they understood each other, and agreed that all was fair in this warfare, it was all right. But I confess it went to my marrow to see him, seated there in cool possession and rifling the owner's property like a pirate. I left him, and took a turn on deck to see that all was well. We were only four besides Miss Lovell, and we should have our hands full to bring the *Mermaid* into Plymouth. One must mount guard on the prisoners, and there were then but three to navigate the schooner. Alston's knowledge of the sea amounted to nothing, but I had a sincere respect for his powers as a shot, and the task of sentry would amply suit him. When his time came he took Stephenson's place before the cabin door, but soon wearied of the inaction, and went inside. How his prisoners received him I do not know, but his visit cannot have been wholly unwelcome, for he emerged a little later to ask me to have a bottle and some food sent in. Alston was a very

abstemious man, but it was more than likely the others were not. At any rate Alston seemed to have enjoyed his chat.

"I planed Jude down a bit," he told me. "He was all angles and kinks, and his finger's mighty bad. He felt mad, but I got him in a cinch, and the old man'll rear up less, I guess. Fact is, Kerslake, I'd sooner by heaps have willing passengers."

So would I. There, of course, was our trouble, but we had to make the best of it. There were several unwilling passengers under the hatches forward, and we had to reckon with them. A little later they were supplied with food, and got their instructions; it behooved them to play a merely passive part for the next two days. Whether or no they would was another matter. In our favour was the fact that they were ignorant of our paucity of numbers. Otherwise would seven or eight able-bodied men allow four to hold them under without a struggle?

I carried Miss Lovell her breakfast when she woke, which she did in a very different mood from that to which she had given way through sheer exhaustion of nerves and nature. Her sleep had refreshed her, and the air was invigorating across a bright blue sea and out of a bright blue heaven. She thanked me prettily and inquired eagerly where we were, and when we should reach Plym-

outh. Seeming satisfied with my answers she went to the cabin door and looked out at the tumbling waste of water. The air was salt and fine with a little morning chill in it, and the colour leapt in her face like a rose. She looked more beautiful than ever in her new Breton picturesqueness, and with that fair English complexion.

Alston paid her a visit a little later, and, I have no doubt, exhibited his customary courtesy, but I did not observe in him any of the ardour of the lover. I concluded that his conduct was regulated by other conventions than exist with us, and that the American man is taught to use women with a better respect, which, being interpreted, should signify more ceremony, and less intimacy. I could not tell from Alston's manner how he felt, but I had an inkling of Miss Lovell's feelings. She had no capacity of concealment; her nature was too impulsive; and, having occasion to visit her a little after Alston, I found her silent and anxious. Life had no right to mark those troubles on that pretty brow. I was moved to comfort her, as one should comfort a child, for she was little more than a child, and I wondered if she understood anything of life. Her feet were upon the threshold, but she had not crossed it; beyond the portals was the unknown, an unknown to which she was being hurried by the exigencies of

her mother, to which she was drawing near with every foot the schooner made. It seemed to me that I recognised that troubled look. Had I not seen it once before, and had I not been constrained by it to speak? I had spoken then for her sake, and with nothing to gain; and I had been rebuffed. Now I was to speak for myself and with everything at stake for me. What should I receive at her hands? I passed swiftly from mere commonplaces about the voyage and our position.

"We shall reach Plymouth within two days, we hope, and then you will be free—free from the persecutions of Rudgwick, and free in every way that you choose."

She looked at me quickly, and then with a certain wistfulness.

"Yes; it has been a nightmare," she said with a sigh.

"It's my hope and my ambition to restore you to your mother's hands," I said.

"You are very kind," she said dully.

The iron was eating into her soul, the iron of doubt, of wonder, of dismay. Was it that?

"But I should like to know one thing, Miss Lovell," I continued firmly, "and that is, whether that restoration will be making wholly for your happiness."

She looked up again at me, and then away. "How can you doubt that?" she asked slowly.

"To be free from that horrible man, and home again—!"

"You shall not mistake me," I said, "I'm not going to mince matters. Mr. Alston and I joined forces to rescue you. But I am nothing to him otherwise, nor he to me. What I have done, I have done not for him, but for you."

"I shall never thank you enough for all you did—in the marsh," she shuddered—"everywhere, always."

I took her hand. "You shall not mistake," I said. She looked at me startled, and her eyes were full of fear. She tried to release her trembling hand. "The circumstances are exceptional," I went on speaking now very fast on the swelling tide of my emotions. "Even if they weren't I think I should speak. I think there has been a mistake—with Mr. Alston. Don't think me presumptuous. But I have guessed things. I think—Oh—" I broke off suddenly, "Sylvia, I want you, I want you. Sylvia, give me yourself."

Slowly the fear had died out of her beautiful eyes, which filled with some other emotion, I could not tell what; and then I was aware that a cold light animated them, and she shrank from me.

"How dare you?" she asked in a low fluttering voice. "Oh, how could you? How hateful of you to—" she uttered a little sob; and tore her hand from mine. "And you thought I—Please

go away. Oh, go away, if you have any honour. You have made me feel—Oh how could you?" she said plaintively.

"I—I am very sorry," I stammered lamely; and she took hold of herself in the curious way she had, drawing herself up tighter, her firm little chin definite; she looked infinitely girlish and proud and angry, and there was shame in the background of her poise and manner.

"Will you be good enough to leave me," she said coldly but nervously, "and I shall be glad if you will send Mr. Alston to me."

My heart fell. I had had my second rebuff, and it was the greater that my hopes had been great. I had had no reason to suppose she cared for me; I had only conjectured that she did not care for Alston. Yet was there not a terrible bitterness in the thought that she sent for him as for her natural protector, for consolation and comfort? I had not insulted her in my offer of honest love, unless it was that she took an expression of love to a woman engaged to another man to be an insult. To me it had not that aspect. I could not bring myself to regard an engagement as equivalent to a marriage in its bindingness, for it has always seemed to me that the period of the former is a period of probation, during which both parties, so to speak, test themselves for the veil they are to take. If Sylvia Lovell loved the man to whom

she was betrothed it was no insult on my part to acquaint her with my feelings towards her; and still less was it derogatory if she did not love him. In the whirl of my mingled feelings I had a sense of bewilderment, of not having been treated quite fairly. My heart was raw with its wounds.

I left her without any further word. I made no apology; I offered no plea. And I took her message to Alston. He nodded, finished his work, and rose. As for me, I went forward into the bow and gazed into the sea,

## CHAPTER XIII

### THE RISING

I TOOK the wheel from Drake at eight bells, with the sun broad on our beam, and the big blue water afield. Alston took his turn at sentry-go before the cabin. Forward there was no sound from the imprisoned hands, whom we had supplied again with food. Alston came to the corner of the deck house and watched me for a time in silence.

"We should make Plymouth pretty soon at this rate," he observed. "She's going free."

The breeze had rattled up behind us, and the schooner dipped and skimmed like a gull; she was afoot to please the heart of a sailor. The earlier she was in Plymouth the better I should be pleased, for I had made up my mind to leave her there, and to walk out of her life and the lives of Alston and Miss Lovell. After all I had achieved what I had initially designed to achieve, the rescue of the girl and the discomfiture of an unscrupulous American magnate.

Alston met me, after my trick, and after I had adjusted a topsail, invited me into his rooms, or

rather into Rudgwick's. Papers neatly docketed, with memoranda, were set out on the table.

"It's to-night of course, we'll have our real ordeal," he remarked casually.

It had been on my mind all day. "Yes, to-night," I assented indifferently.

"Think they'll make any attempt?" he asked.

"Well, the skipper and Butterfield know by this that we've four and no more, and that's one more than they. But the imprisoned hands are probably under the impression that we're a crew."

"That was my idea," he remarked with a nod.

"So," I concluded, "our condition's not desperate, if we can keep the hatches sealed."

"Oh, we'll do that," said Alston confidently. He glanced across the taffrail. "Look here; don't go, man," he said. "Have a whiskey. I want a talk. You sit down, Lieutenant." I declined the whiskey, but sat down, and he leaned back in his chair, eyeing me. "Your position in this affair is what's troubling me," said he. "I want to know where you come in."

"It's rather late to think of that, isn't it?" I asked.

He looked at his cigar. "There's got to be a beginning to all things," he said sententiously, "and I don't know but what this is just beginning."

"What do you mean?" I asked sharply. I

did not know, and I never knew, what passed in that interview between Alston and Miss Lovell. But his words were enough to inflame me in my state.

"Well, say you came into this for the sheer love of the game," he remarked, still observing his cigar. "That's not a bad notion."

"There's a little more in it than that," I said rather dryly.

"As how?" He looked at me.

"You forget that a countrywoman of mine had been abducted by a friend of yours."

I put it in that offensive way on purpose, but he took no offence. His eyes twinkled.

"I see," he remarked. "Let us put it in this way then, Kerslake. You wanted your bellyfull of adventure, and you liked the rôle of knight errant, of Paladin, say."

"You may put it in that way, if you like," I replied. "It's not of much consequence how it's put. The incident's all but over, and I've nearly done with it."

He pondered. "Is it?" he asked slowly. "I wish I knew. See, you don't know Rudgwick. Well, anyway, I'm much obliged to you, Mr. Kerslake, for your help. I guess I've pulled through on that. But all the same," and again his eyes twinkled, "I can't say you've acted on the square to me."

I jumped to my feet. "Damn it, sir——" I was beginning when he stopped me.

"Don't fuss any," he enjoined soothingly. "There's none too many of us for the work. Say, let's have it out, if you will, only sensibly. I like you, and you've done well by me, but you've played on the crook a bit."

By this time I was master of my impetuous temper. "You are referring to Miss Lovell," I said as deliberately as he. He nodded, waiting, and watching with bright eyes.

"I proposed to her this afternoon," I said bluntly.

Again he nodded. "I guessed that." Then he had not been told. I was glad; I was more than glad.

"I am quite frank, and I was quite frank. I suggested to Miss Lovell that she had no feeling for you, and I invited her to care for me."

He put his head to one side, his long legs crossed before him, as he tilted his chair. "That sounds fair as a whole," he said complacently. "I don't know that I've any particular fault to find with that."

"That is all," I said curtly.

"I reckon you should have known your own blood better," he observed. "English girl spells loyalty, a damn sight more than with us. I recollect an old story of yours I heard that seems

to kind of come in, about a stout old marquis comforting himself on this matter, that Basing House was called Loyalty. Well, I don't exactly mark you out for blame, seeing who it was; but you might have waited until we got to Plymouth and taken your congé there rather than have it happen on my boat, so to speak. It would have looked prettier, Kerslake; you can take it from me."

His smile was amiable enough, and was probably designed to take the sting out of his words; but his manner, his air of overlordship galled me. I cannot say that he had taken the episode with an ill grace, but I would far sooner that he had broken out in anger than have used me with such patronizing tolerance.

"Pardon me," I said with suppressed fury. "The *Esperance* is mine." He stared. "It is in my name, and I have discharged the expenses. The expedition's mine."

His eyes gleamed. "So," he said at last. "Then that's why you put me off with a tale of after-payment. You had the notion of this all along. Well, it begins to look like a deep-laid plot, Kerslake," he said with an easy laugh.

"That about hits it," I agreed.

"Well," he said. "I guess we'll deal for this charter when we get to Plymouth, and will call it square. I don't make any bones about it." He put out his hand. I hesitated.

"I wish you to know," I said, "that I am of the same opinion still."

"Bless you, I don't blame you, dear man," he interjected.

"I'm out of it, but I'm not necessarily done," I said. "If I were sure you had Miss Lovell's sincere affection I would say nothing."

He smiled. "You are an infidel, Kerslake," he said, "a real unbeliever. Well, this looks like a determined assault. I guess I've got to take you on. As I've got Wilson on me, I guess it won't make much odds taking you on too." He patted my back in a friendly way, and I freely admit he cut the better figure. To an onlooker there must have seemed a largeness about his motives and his actions, but I was not sure. If not, he could stage-manage wonderfully.

I was passing out when he said,

"Say, Kerslake, what's the matter with a little dinner to-night in company? We can fix up with Wilson's stores, and I'm a fair hand with pots and pans. I'll give you a genuine American dinner, barring pop-corn, and Miss Lovell shall join us."

I had perhaps been ungracious enough, and I smiled back in answer—"Always provided you take me on my terms I shall be delighted."

"Oh, we've got to take each other on terms,"

he said cheerfully, "and I'd take you on any terms. That's fixed then."

In my acceptance I had not thought of Miss Lovell, but only of Alston and myself; but later I had some misgivings about facing her, and the event proved that I was right. It was a singular and uncomfortable meal. Constraint possessed Miss Lovell, and I was ill at ease in my heart. It was Alston who carried it through. He talked even more than usual, as if he were aware of the difficulty of the situation, and were resolved to smooth it out. He was fluent to a degree, and excelled himself in his address. He recommended this dish or that, dwelled on its points, and gave us its history. Miss Lovell ate very sparingly, and was silent. Her face was pale, which did but lend accent to its youthful beauty. I think I did what was requisite in supporting the burden of conversation, but I did it by an effort, which must have been obvious. And whenever a pause opened Alston stepped gallantly into the breach with some anecdote, or jest, or reminiscence. He had a flow of small stories calculated for after dinner conversation. Particularly did he talk of Rudgwick and his associates.

"There's Jude now, that little red-faced, tip-nosed dead-head we've got boxed up. He ran a boat on the Erie once, and got into trouble with the Canadian authorities. It was Wilson

brought him out of that. Wilson fixed him for a useful man, and he's been useful to him beyond denying. Jude and a crew got into a mess over some job of Wilson's away down East, and Jude and his mate found themselves in the dock mighty quick. Well, first Wilson tries to buy them out indirectly, but it wouldn't go. So he goes to work otherwise. He primes all the witnesses, that is the crew, with drink so that they come into the box dead drunk, and thus he gets the trial postponed. Then when it came on again, every blessed witness was absent. They were being kept away down South on one of Wilson's ranches, kept like fatted calves, and no letters delivered to them, and no addresses known. So there being no evidence forthcoming against Jude, he and his mate were discharged. Wilson's the man for seeing a thing through."

"It's to be hoped he won't see this thing through," I could not help saying.

Alston glanced at Miss Lovell. "He'll see it through in a way," he answered, "and when he gets to the end and finds a dead wall, he won't run his head against it. That's not his way. He'll go home and order a good dinner at Sherry's. I guess Wilson's a philosopher. He's a good loser." He paused, listening; and above the wash of the sea against the schooner I could hear voices. Alston jumped up, and I followed his

example. He opened the cabin-door that gave on the deck.

"What's the game?" he demanded. "Oh, a prisoner wants something, does he? Wants to make a communication. Who is it? My friend Jude? No, Butterfield. Come along Mr. Butterfield; we'll talk right away."

He stepped out upon the deck, leaving me with Miss Lovell, and the door closed behind him. At once my embarrassment increased, and I too was for departure. She had sat watching us with a growing expression of suspicion and alarm, and now it was those alone that I saw in her face; and oddly as it may sound, they re-assured me.

"Is it——" she hesitated.

"No; it is nothing," I answered, "only a request from one of the prisoners—Butterfield, I think."

She sighed her relief, and then unexpectedly after a moment's pause broke out: "Mr. Ker-slake, I do thank you with all my heart for your goodness to me, at the château and in the swamp, and all through. You mustn't believe me ungrateful."

"I could never have done that," I said lamely.

"Oh but——" she looked distress at me, but Alston re-entered ere she could go on. He was

laughing silently, as if in appreciation of a rich joke.

"Say, did you like that dinner any?" he inquired.

We both answered civilly in the affirmative. "Well, if it's not complete, we can add a dish to the menu. Personally I've rather a fancy to do it. Here's Mr. Butterfield anxious to oblige."

"Butterfield!" said I.

"Yes—tells me that I can apply to you for a testimonial for his omelettes. Dear Sir, I have tasted your omelette, since which I have eat no other. That sort of thing. Sylvia, what do you say? Can you eat omelette?"

Swiftly her glance met mine, and I knew why. We both recalled simultaneously the part played by that previous omelette. She shook her head.

"I couldn't eat anything more."

"Well, I guess we'll have it anyway," said Alston cheerfully, "if you'll pass it, Kerslake."

"Oh, I have eaten Butterfield's omelettes," said I. "But I don't know why he should take such thought for our palates."

"No; I was wondering that," said Alston easily. "That's why I want him in." He went to the door and shouted an order to the sentry; and then came back. "Butterfield complains of dullness. Well, I've been in places that were duller than Jude's company. Jude and the blear-eyed

bos'un play cards I gave 'em, Jude with his bloody finger in a rag; and Jude smokes and chews and the bos'un smokes and chews; and that cabin's a rarity. It turns Butterfield's stomach, he says. Well, I'm not wondering. He can't play cards, which he disapproves of, and he don't drink, and the smell of tobacco makes him queasy. Butterfield wants airing, and says so."

As he spoke the little man entered, his sallow ugly face distorted in a grin.

"I've given you my parole, Mr. Alston, not to escape. I guess now it's real good of you to hang me up to dry like this. I can't get the smell out of my face. I hope you're well, Miss Lieutenant, how are you?"

"I have heard of your powers, Butterfield," began Alston solemnly, "in culinary affairs from Mr. Kerslake here, and the sense of this company has been taken to invite you to a performance. We should prefer to see you in one of your more eccentric acts, but we leave the turn to you confidently, as an artist and a master."

"I thank you, gentlemen, for your consideration, and the compliment it implies," said Butterfield as gravely, "and, if it's all one to the company, I'll take the omelette feat. Say, have you got fixtures here?"

Alston's face carried a broad smile, as he leaned back in his chair.

"If it will not interfere with the turn, Mr. Butterfield," he said, "I should like a cigar, if Miss Lovell has no objection."

Miss Lovell murmured a negative, and kept her eyes on Butterfield.

"It's chewing I object to," he explained, as he explored in a cupboard behind Alston. He re-appeared with a chafing-dish, and set it on the table before Miss Lovell. "You can do pretty well what you will with a chafing-dish," he went on with pride. "And now with your leave, Mr. Alston, I'll be seeing what about the materials. Butter and eggs are all I want I guess."

"There's butter in the cupboard," said Alston.

"Eggs?" he queried. "No; I guess they're in cook's quarters."

Alston rose. "Let's get 'em out of the galley," said he, and out he went accompanied by the factotum.

When they returned Butterfield was supplied with eggs, and set to work. He had something between the air of a music-hall juggler, and that of a cheap-jack, exhibiting his wares. He rattled on glibly, with the same solemn countenance, occasionally illuminated by a smile.

"I guess this dish takes a deal of doing properly," he declared, and there's some points in it that I can add. It'll beat Paris cookery when

I've done with it. It's no great shakes as it is—kind of lacks bif! Lieutenant, you did me proud over that omelette, but it wasn't a nice mess, Sir, no. But I took it kindly, as I did from the lady."

The omelette smoked in the pan, and Alston looked on with interested eyes.

"I'm just wondering, Butterfield," said he, "why you took a notion to play chef to us."

"You spend twelve hours on end in atmosphere like that yonder, and you'd take a notion to do any blamed thing that would help you out," said he. "I reckon I'm a monkey earning my airing."

There was something farcical in the situation, and yet the recurrence of this culinary feat seemed to be a little ominous. When he had treated me to an omelette before it had been the signal for his discomfiture. Of that he knew nothing, yet irony could go no farther than to retort upon us in this second dish. I got up uneasily and touched Alston on the shoulder.

"I don't like this," I whispered.

He drew his level brows at me, "I'm wondering," he returned. "We'll have the farce over. Say Butterfield, you're a mighty fine hand at a dish, and the banquet's just lovely. But I don't feel that gnawing appetite which I reckoned on. What's the matter with taking that steaming

handsome and odorous mess into Jude and Co. in a lordly dish?"

"Well," Butterfield dubitated, as if crestfallen. "If you really mean it,—"

"What's that?" said I. A sound, a disturbing sound, came from without. Butterfield smoothed his mess lovingly.

"I don't mind if I do," he drawled loudly.

I sprang to the door, as a crash reached my ears, and then it burst open and dark figures filled the open space.

"This is you, Butterfield," cried Alston of a sudden infuriate. "By God, you're a done man," and there was a report of a revolver in the cabin. Butterfield had flung himself to the floor right against Alston's legs to which he clung like an imp.

"We're ten to two," cried a voice from the doorway. "We've nabbed you, man." Alston let the butt of his weapon fall viciously on Butterfield's head, and pointed and fired at the speaker.

There was a laugh and an oath, as the door banged. "Reckon we won't spoil sport," shouted a deep voice. "Glad for you to have the cabin. So long."

"Jude, by heavens!" exclaimed Alston, and suddenly disentangled the shrimp from his foot with a twist. He was his own master again, after that one fell flash of diabolic frenzy.

"So you had me, old man," he remarked coolly. "Get on your legs, and I'll knock the sawdust out of you."

Butterfield wriggled in his grasp, ineffectually, but regarded him quietly enough, with as much self-possession as his captor.

"Reckon this is war, but I didn't break my parole," he remarked puffing.

"I guess it is," said Alston with significance, "and war according to Montana rules. It's shoot on sight, Butterfield, and you chew that sonny. You're smart, and earn your dime a day, I dare-say, but Wilson Rudgwick's going to go short of a man, when you tumble up against me. You got a family, sonny?"

"I got a girl in Philadelphia," said Butterfield.

"Wilson'll have to put up masses for the fatherless then, I guess. I'm not going to be jockeyed out of this. There's been too much monkeying about. We've been sort of playing see-saw, and I'm tired. No, git."

"What do you mean?" asked Butterfield, for he had jerked a pistolled hand at the door.

"Oh, I wasn't going to shoot you; never fear. I've got more use than that for you. It's someone else is going to do that," he said deliberately. He strode to the door, a masterful man, and opened it slightly. The stars in heaven peeped

in by that aperture, and revealed a figure close by. The released crew had taken a leaf out of our book. The tables were indeed turned. Alston closed the door softly.

"It stands to reason that if I'm potted I lose the game," he said. "Consequently I'm not going to be potted. If anyone is to be potted it's you. See, Butterfield? Kerslake, get your pinfire. Now, Butterfield, open that door and git, but git slowly. Stay, I'll have a cinch on you."

So saying he opened a drawer, took out a ball of twine, and cut off a long piece, which he proceeded to tie about his victim's arms. I now began to see his drift, but I did not like it. He designed to make an attack upon the enemy, using Butterfield as a shield and buckler. It was a dashing idea, but it was foolhardy. They were ten in number, and some of them no doubt were armed. They were not particular in their methods, as we had already proof. What chance had we against them?

Butterfield hesitated. He had plenty of courage in that withered little unhealthy frame, but he shrank from the ignominy of that vicarious death. Alston's blue eyes were like steel. He tapped his man meaningly on the shoulder.

"They will shoot," said Miss Lovell in dis-

tress. Her face in the electric light was dead white, and her eyes were full of terror. "Oh, will they shoot?"

"We're not going to be troubled much," said Alston.

"It won't do," said I. "We've no chance."

"See here, Kerslake," he replied sharply. "What's this fool nonsense about chances? I haven't but a hair of a chance anyway. She's putting round, I guess, for Rudgwick, and you'll see me sailing right up to Wilson like a dandy boy, will you?" he sneered. "'Come aboard, sir, to take my gruel.' No; I'll be damned if I will. If I've got no chance I'm going to make a chance, and I'm making it right now. Buck up, sonny," he addressed Butterfield. "You're going to your friends, and can call out and tell 'em so, if you're inclined."

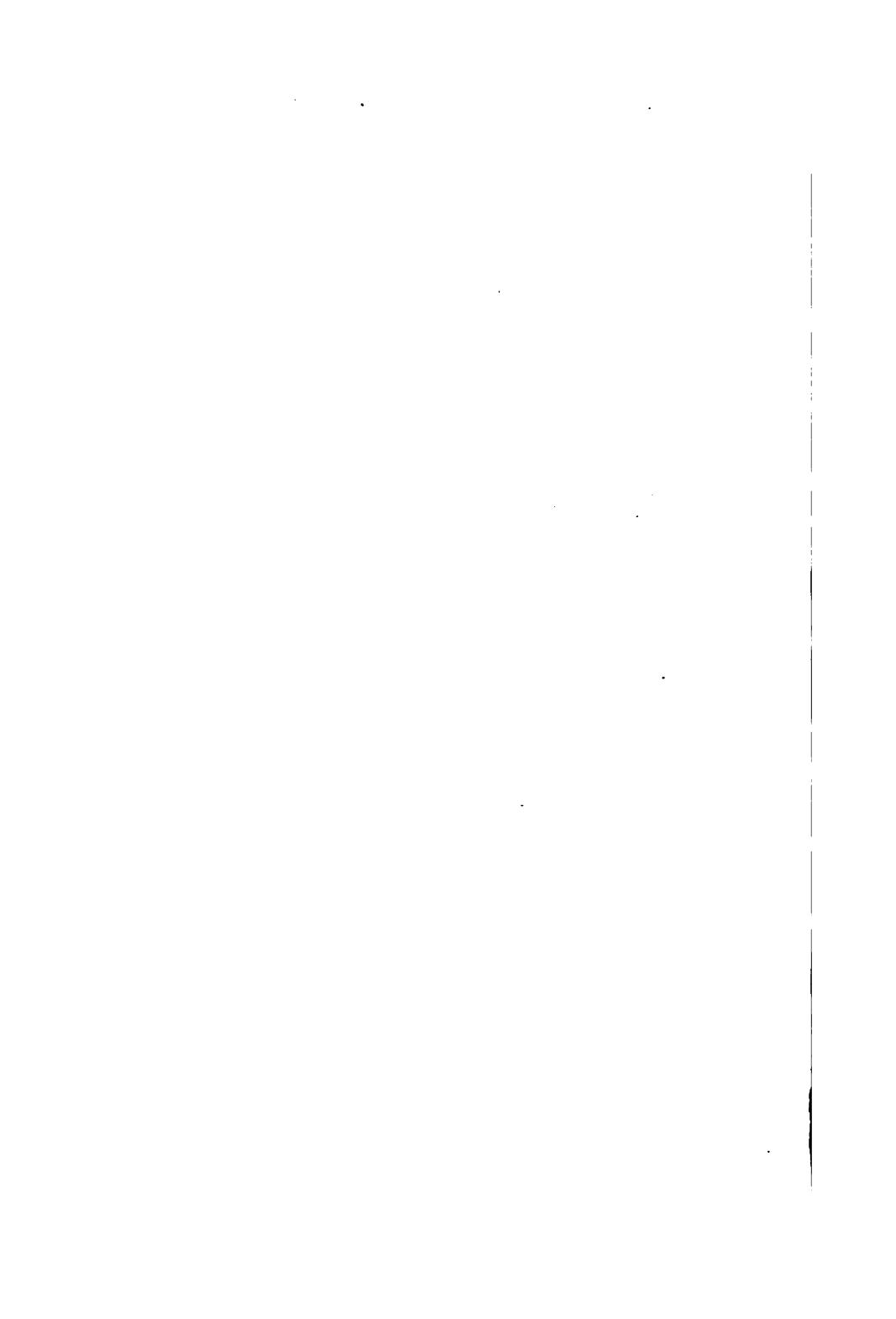
Butterfield made no protest; he cast a measuring glance askew at me, his dark face fallen into corrugations, and his eyes in nests of wrinkles; and then he obeyed his taskmaster. Alston gently turned the handle of the cabin door, and pushed his prisoner to the fore.

"Say, boys, it's me, and there's pistols behind me," cried Butterfield suddenly.

"That's all right," said Alston, and drew a sight over the little man's shoulder. "I've cornered you, Jude," he called. "Guess you better



**"Fire belched across Butterfield's shoulder"**



go back to your cabin and take it easy. This here strenuous life's up against you."

For answer a revolver cracked, and Alston uttered an oath.

"That's not bad, Jude, a daisy-cutter through my curls. It makes up for the finger-joint. Well, how's that?"

Fire belched across Butterfield's shoulder, and there was a noise of a fall in the darkness. "Three inches above the ankle,—that should be," he added cheerfully.

There was a gruff short laugh out of the darkness which had thickened perceptibly. The savour of approaching rain was in the nostrils. As for me I stood like a fool by Alston resolved to take no foolish risks, such as he seemed bent on taking, but equally determined to use my weapon if I were attacked.

Butterfield, projected in an undignified advance, served as a buckler to my companion, who was now silent, as were the enemy. He moved amidships, and I followed. Butterfield alone broke the stillness, talking volubly, clearly with the design to acquaint his friends with our whereabouts.

"Drop that, little man, or I'll fling you overboard," threatened Alston at last.

"We're not pinning much on Nathaniel Butterfield," exclaimed the skipper's voice. "We'll let her go on chance."

My head struck the boom of the foresail at that moment, and I put out an arm, clutched Alston and dragged him down; and all three of us fell in a coil on the deck. Simultaneously reports rang out, but nothing touched us.

"They mean business," whispered Alston. "Where the devil's that little skunk?" But Butterfield was gone, having wriggled himself free. "I've a mind to try a pot shot," went on Alston in the same undertone. "But I won't. He's served his purpose. Do you know the hang of this blamed boat?"

I whispered back where we lay, and he began to crawl noiselessly forward. I followed him. A small rain now had begun to fall.

## CHAPTER XIV

### THE FIGHT IN THE DARK

THE schooner was enveloped in darkness and silence, and we made our way without interference towards the foremast, taking shelter by the high pole. The boom creaked and a full wind occupied the canvas overhead.

"Got any cartridges?" whispered Alston.

"Four," I returned.

"Good!" said he. "Let's await events."

The rain drizzled steadily for ten minutes or more and we were getting uncomfortably wet, before we heard any news of the enemy. Then we observed a light going about on the after deck.

"Someone, like Diogenes, looking for an honest man," remarked Alston. "He won't find much in this crew of Wilson's unless he finds us, and we've got to stop him." The lantern went down the port side, and disappeared behind the fore-sail, leaving only a glimmer through the canvas. Then it emerged to the bows.

Alston nudged me. The man with the lantern stopped and approached the mast. Alston's re-

volver cracked, and the lantern went out with a crash.

"Damn it, I thought I'd got Jude," he whispered to me, "but he's as large as life and twice as nasty." I put my hand to silence him, for the loom of a figure rose against the night and the bulwarks.

"Gosh, we'll have him, anyway," he said, and suddenly leapt like a panther.

The man went down without a sound, for the rain was roaring loud in the sails now, and filled the ears with noise. I felt my way to Alston, and he set his mouth to my face.

"Aren't we close by the hatchway?" he called.  
"Shove him down."

The hatch of the forecastle, indeed, was near at hand, and we bundled the unfortunate captive forthright through the opening, drawing the covering tight, and securing it.

"One!" said Alston to my ear; and began to scramble off towards the stern like a black spider. The rain drummed, and the sea spurned over the side of the schooner as she dipped in the rising sea; and we were both of us drenched. There was something grotesque in the situation. Here we were, two prisoners on a hostile boat with ten or twelve hands, and we designed to capture them and seize it. Our only ally was the black night, unless to that be added the beat of the rain which

drowned other noises, and prevented them from discovering our whereabouts.

About midships the boom came slowly across and grazed my shoulder, and at the same time Alston grappled someone. I was aware of the struggle that went on beside me, but I could be of no assistance owing to the darkness and the impossibility of determining friend from enemy. But presently I heard his voice.

"Two!" he cried, and triumph and breathlessness rang in his voice. "Say, Kerslake, this is better than the first act, eh? Get a hold of him. We'll fling him after his companion." He had hardly spoken before something out of the rigging struck him to the deck. It fell heavy and black, but as it were misshapen—an imp, a monkey. I put out my arms and grabbed it, and it struggled with me with ferocity, astride of Alston, who in his turn pinned his victim under his weight.

"Hutchins, man—get a move on you!" shrilled a voice, and it was a voice I recognised. "Say, work up, man."

It was Butterfield, the shrimp, Butterfield the devoted, at work for his "boss." Underneath Alston the man, Hutchins, was reviving his struggles, but I had Butterfield by the middle and was squeezing him.

"I'll look after him, if you'll keep your man," I shouted to Alston, and he understood, for,

abandoning any attempt to get rid of the monkey on his back he devoted his attention to the man under him.

My muscles from long apprenticeship were in full training, and they contracted on Butterfield's ribs. He stood it as long as it was in human nature to stand the terrible constriction, and then made a feeble movement of surrender. I relaxed and drew him off Alston whose victim was once more quiet.

"I guess—you—can crack nuts" panted Butterfield.

"I can crack monkey-nuts at all events," I replied in a flight of whimsy.

It was all so mad; it was preposterous; and yet we had three men of that crew now.

"Seems like old times," laughed Alston as we stole along the side of the schooner with our prisoners. We secured them with the other, and started out again. I knew we were marching on doom, but Alston was fey. The lust of battle possessed him. A light flashed half a dozen yards away, and almost with the first flash it was out and the glass was splintering on the deck.

"She showed flame, so we'd better move," said Alston, putting up his revolver. "I guess that's Jude again. It's only Jude that would dare that. I shot him once, and I'll shoot him again if need be, but I guess his lantern's a better mark."

He was in high spirits, and it almost seemed that his monstrous audacity and confidence would carry us through. We crept aft again, and then of a sudden a rush of feet, pounding on the deck, sounded even above the rain. They came at us in a body, and Alston put his back to the deck-house which we had reached.

"It's real suicide, Jude," he shouted; and even as he would have shot (and I cannot guess with what results) he staggered backwards, and clutched at me. Taken by surprise I too yielded and went backwards. I had a vague impression of striking against something several times, and of pain and confusion. When I was at rest and had fully recovered I found I was at the bottom of the companion ladder, lying on Alston, with an aching head. I got to my feet with difficulty, and groped about in the darkness. I poked Alston in the body, and he groaned. Then I extracted a match from my pocket and struck it. It flared feebly on the small saloon into which we had fallen, and which in my early survey of the schooner I had noted as additional to the staterooms on deck. Alston came to in the flicker of the light, and sat up.

"I never guessed Jude was as mighty quick as that," he observed.

"It wasn't Jude," said I. "You fell down the companion ladder and pulled me with you."

"Oh!" he remarked, taking this in, and then slowly rose to his feet. "There should be a light somewhere about. Wilson fitted out his yacht as smart as he knew. Guess there's electric fittings somewhere."

I struck another match, and looked about. A switch caught my eye and I put it down; instantly a bright point of light illuminated the saloon. I pressed another switch, and we were in full radiance."

"Let's see the amount of damage," said Alston, seating himself. He passed his hands over his legs and body. "Not even a rib gone. We fell pretty easy, Kerslake, though seems to me you had the better berth." He laughed. "How's your head? Mine's like hot iron." He got up and went to the foot of the stairway and slowly climbed to the top, when he was confronted by the shut door. He tried the handle, but the door would not give. It had been locked.

Alston came back. "That came mighty near coming off, but it didn't," he observed. "And like so many good things an accident bungled it. I guess that fixes us." He stared at me with unseeing eyes, a frown on his forehead, and repeated his words presently. "I guess that fixes us," with a short laugh. His fingers worked nervously in a clenched fist, and he was oblivious of my pressure. From first to last Herbert

Fordyce Alston was the most self-centred man I have ever encountered. He sat for ten minutes, wrapped in thought, and hardly changing his expression; nor did he move when I rose and began an examination of the saloon and the cabins that opened off it. I had just made a discovery in a larder when I heard Alston's voice behind me. It rang out quite cheerfully, and as if he had not made his last cast and lost.

"What you got there, Kerslake? Gosh, that's good hearing." I guess I'm an hungered and I shouldn't mind something to drink. I've a growth on, now I come to think of it. Say, does your head ache any?"

I extracted from the larder some cold food and a bottle of whiskey. "I think we've both earned a drink," I remarked. He nodded, poured a little spirit into the glass I had fetched and diluted it with plenty of water.

"Here's now," he remarked genially.

His cheerfulness was unabashed even in that great downfall of his fortunes, and I will confess that I marvelled at the man. I drank in recognition of his toast, and we ate a little of the food.

"I guess we're fixed, Lieutenant," he said once more. "We're part of Wilson's cargo now, only they don't pay freight on us. Come to think of it Wilson's paid himself." He showed his even white teeth in a pleasant smile, and took another

sip of his whiskey. He glanced about him. "He does himself well. Wilson's a sybarite out of business hours, but he'll sit on a high stool from nine till five. If he'd had imagination and could see things that wasn't there he'd have gone far. But he can only see things under his nose, and then he goes for them like a bull-dog. You see, he's a sort of Britisher, and you do lay hold when you bite. Still I'm not going to promise that Wilson Rudwick isn't going to get left some day." His face sank into thought, from which he was disturbed only by my rising. I opened one of the port-holes, and the sea broke in our ears. I became conscious of my soaked clothes, and then I thought of Sylvia Lovell above.

She was safe; she would have remained in her cabin in complete security, for the issues of this fight did not concern her, although it raged about her. Alston spoke at last.

"I'm going to turn in," said he. "I reckon I've fairly earned my sleep."

"We both have," I replied, "and I'll follow your example."

It was not ten minutes before he was snugly ensconced in one of the bunks. I do not know if he slept soon or well, but I did, and the last in my thoughts ere I slept was the girl who, I hoped, slumbered peacefully on deck.

The summer dawn came soon, but it was about

six o'clock when I awoke, and I only awoke then because of an unwonted noise. Getting out of my bunk I pushed my head out of the door and looked into the cabin. Butterfield stood on the stairway, and was calling.

"Mr. Alston! Mr. Alston!"

I threw my clothes on and emerged to find Alston already there.

"Well, my dandy boy," he said cheerfully to Butterfield. "Now, what's to prevent my putting a hole through you," and he brought out his revolver. "I must say you have brass standing there in that inviting, not to say provocative, attitude."

Little Butterfield did not display alarm. "All right, boss," he said. "Only make it after breakfast. Say, would you gentlemen like breakfast? Maybe you're hungry after the exercise of last night."

"Maybe we are. I could do with something hot, and there's only cold stuff in this larder," said Alston. "Say, my dandy, what's the matter with Jude inviting us to breakfast?"

Butterfield looked doubtful. "Oh," went on Alston reassuringly. "We won't make any fuss. See, we're willing to give our parole, eh, Mr. Kerslake, and as an earnest of that here's my barker, Butterfield. You take it along to Jude. It's peace, d'ye see. We've tried and we let up

on it. See? Now make tracks and tell Jude I'd like to have a talk with him. He's got the bulge on us. Let's talk."

Butterfield nodded, and left us, taking Alston's revolver, and locking the door at the top of the staircase. During his absence Alston went about whistling, and jesting, and making small talk for all the world like a man who has got what he wanted and is indifferent to what the future may have in store.

Presently Butterfield returned and flung wide the door.

"Mr. Alston!" he called out in an usher-like way, and Alston stepped briskly forward, not by any means as one going to execution, not even as one on his way to see the doctor. It struck me as a little odd that I was so completely ignored in these interchanges, and yet it was perhaps natural that so self-centred and masterful a person as Alston should dominate the situation. If anyone were to arrange the terms of a peace, or a truce, it was certainly he that should do so; but here was I left out of the parole, so to speak, and revolver in hand, though I admit that it was by now not a very formidable weapon.

He was absent a good hour, and in the meantime Butterfield served me with breakfast in his friendly manner.

"Say, Lieutenant," he volunteered. "You got

mighty strong arms. I guess I'm pretty well bit through like a wasp. Gosh, I feel sore." He meditatively felt himself, after putting a dish on the table.

"I'm sorry, Butterfield," said I. "But you would ask for it, and I'm an obliging man."

He felt my biceps admiringly. "Gosh, it's hard. Guess I'd have thought twice before I would have come on you if I'd known."

"You cannot respect my physical powers," I said politely, "as vastly as I respect your mental powers. I understand it is to you we owe this revolution."

Butterfield looked modest. "I reckon it might be considered so in a kind of way," he admitted.

"Come, I'm anxious to know how you managed it," I asked. His alert eyes flashed on me humourously. "Guess. I'd like to know how you managed at the château," he said.

"It's a bargain," said I.

Butterfield trimmed his nails, for in spite of his ugliness he was a man of neat mind. "It was just luck," he asserted. "Maybe we would have gone a fortnight and the chance never come. But it just did come. I fixed up to do that omelette for you, Lieutenant, same as I did before, and I guessed I'd have to make tracks for the eggs. That took me forward. See? Well, there was the

luck. Alston was too mighty confident that time, and he wasn't thinking too much of Nathaniel Butterfield. According to his move then I guess Nathaniel Butterfield didn't amount to much. And so I got the chance. I passed down the hatchway a bit of paper, just setting out the facts. They fancied they were seized by a full sized crew. Eight ablebodied men are not going to knuckle under when they learn there's only two on sentry-go, and four in all. So that fixed the rising. And as I'd named a time, when that uproar broke out your sentry took a flurry, and I guess he lost his nerves and forgot the skipper and Taylor. And that's pretty much all."

It sounded very simple, and I wondered that we had not anticipated such a rising. But it was the ingenious detail that took my attention, and the irony of the fact that both Butterfield and I on our respective occasions, owed a debt to his omelette. It was with a certain satisfaction that I told him so. He stared.

"Now, that's very very interesting," he pronounced. "Gosh! To think of you getting the bulge on me with my own omelette! Well, Lieutenant, I guess we can shake on that and cry quits."

When Alston returned he was in a subdued mood, but still fairly cheerful.

"I've given parole," he informed me, "and you

can do likewise, if you feel so disposed. We've played our trumps and got left; and it's no use making bones about it."

What was he going to do? He had appeared so determined, and now was he to resign himself to Rudgwick? It did not seem consistent with his character.

"Perhaps, you'll be good enough, then, to acquaint me with the programme," I said bluntly.

He glanced at me. "We've played pretty hard to win," he said, "and we deserved to win, but Fate's up against us. It's now a case of a deal with Rudgwick."

"Oh," said I. "You will come to terms."

"That's about the size of it," he answered reflectively. "I don't carry enough guns on this trip, as you can see. I guess I'll settle."

"Oh, very well," said I, feeling somehow very chagrined, yet aware that he had reason on his side.

"And that being so," he pursued, taking a seat and speaking very amiably, "all that I can do is to return thanks to you for all you've done, and—"

"And take the ship out of commission," I put in dryly.

"That's a technical way of putting it," he smiled at me. "Though nothing I can say would carry my appreciation of your assistance far enough."

"You must not forget," I told him, "exactly with what motives I have assisted."

"No," he said deliberately. "But I'm not pinning much on them. I'm treating it from my point of view."

"As long as we understand each other's points of view, we shan't blunder," I said firmly, "and I want you to understand mine. You're going to make a concession to Rudgwick to overcome his—let me say opposition to your marriage. It looks as if I should have you both on my hands."

He looked positively startled. "How so?" he asked.

"At present he and I both object to this marriage," I said, "and you're going to convert him."

He laughed. "Oh, we'll get along, together, you and I, Kerslake," he said. "You'll be best man for me, before we're done."

"I won't make any prophecies," I answered as pleasantly as he. "Only it appears to me that we're beginning the third act now."

He pondered. "And last," he added.

"There are usually four acts in a serious drama," I reminded him.

"But three in a farce," said he lightly. "Maybe this is a farce."

"It's a queer piece, at any rate," said I, "and has involved tragedy."

"Oh, I guess Wilson's fixed up weeds for the

widows," he remarked indifferently, rising to go. At the foot of the stairs he paused. "If I were you I'd give my parole, Kerslake. It will be more comfortable."

"Certainly," I said. "I'm not a fool, and shall get no good of the sulks. I'm with you."

I accompanied him to the deck, where my blear-eyed friend was in waiting. I held out my revolver. "Take this to the captain with my compliments," I said cheerfully.

The man grinned as he took it, and I strode after Alston, who went to the deck house.

"Well, here's two of us, Jude," he called out. "Fetch her along, smart now. Time's valuable."

The skipper's red face was thrust out of a door, grave and observant.

"Come along, gentlemen," he thundered in his big bass voice. "Come in and have a tot of rum."

We buried the hatchet under that tot, and then I left the two, and went out. The schooner spread all her canvas, and was footing it merrily. At this rate we should soon be at Quiberon or wherever it was on that coast we were bound for. The door of the state-rooms stood secured ajar, and I knocked on it, in obedience to an impulse. As I did so I remembered that Sylvia Lovell's name had not been mentioned in our conversation in the saloon.

Her face appeared in the aperture, and she opened the door, a flash of something I could not interpret in her expression.

"You were not hurt then?" she asked quickly.

"No, we are both unharmed," I said, "which perhaps is more than we deserve. It was smart business."

"It was very brave," she answered quickly."

"Mr. Alston is nothing if not courageous," I replied, and I asked how she had fared. Beyond the alarm and excitement incidental to the struggle she was all right. No one had molested her.

There fell a pause between us, and a pause of some embarrassment. Trouble was in the eyes that she dropped, for I suppose we both were thinking of my outbreak to her.

"Mr. Alston will have told you that everything is over now," I began awkwardly.

"Everything over?" she stammered. "No, I have not seen him. I was wondering—"

"That he had not come. He has been very busy, doubtless, settling matters with the captain." I said this, though in private I was amazed that he had not made time to see her. That would have been my first consideration.

"I meant I was wondering what you were doing —how you were free," she explained.

"Oh!" I told her. "Mr. Alston is to make his

peace with Rudgwick, and you will be free from persecution."

"He has given in?" she asked wondering.

"Yes."

Her face wondered still. She looked seaward; and then Alston's voice issued from behind me.

"Say, Sylvia, it would be very nice if you would ask us both in."

I turned and encountered his quizzical look. He never forgot his manners.

"Of—of course," stammered the girl. "Won't you come in?"

## CHAPTER XV

### AT THE "PETITS OISEAUX"

We made the land late in the afternoon after a brisk voyage. Alston vanished from the state-rooms very shortly after lunch, and I think he was closeted with the skipper. The latter was a formidable sort of man, who possessed in addition to his big voice a twinkle in his eye, and a thirsty throat. His drink affected him not at all, as far as I could see, but I knew that he resorted constantly to the bottle, and was glad of a crony. Alston and he visited the cabin several times, and once or twice in passing the door I caught the clink of glasses. Alston I had discovered to be the most temperate of men, and so I attributed the sound to the captain. I spent the best of the afternoon on deck, although I used the saloon on occasions, finding there a book or a magazine with which to while away the time. The prospect disconcerted me, for it seemed to presage an abrupt termination of my adventure. Indeed the events of the day put me, as it were, out of the reckoning, exiled me from the considerations

involving the remaining three of the chief personages in our drama.

The loom of the coast was apparent about four o'clock when I stood in the forecastle, busy with my thoughts; and here Butterfield came across me.

"Guess you'll be glad to get back home, Lieutenant," said he.

"Why," said I shortly, "do you think you're going to be rid of me easily?"

"Oh, I can't say it's been easy," he rejoined.

"Anyway," I said, "you may be able to tell me where we fetch up."

"I calculate we should strike the boss at Quiberon."

"And why Quiberon?" I asked.

"Well, I couldn't fix it nearer," he replied, "when you got away I was just about to signal him that maybe something would be turning up; and so I guess he's left his tracks about the coast somewhere."

"Oh!" said I feeling an increased respect for so far-seeing and successful a plotter. "So we've broken on you."

He modestly disclaimed the compliment. "It was my fault you got away, and I had to make up for it. I've just pulled through."

However it was looked at he had won the trick, and the thought was not pleasant, nor was it

even pleasant to reflect that Alston was taking it, as the phrase runs, "lying down." It was uncanny. Miss Lovell surprised me deep in these musings.

"Are you—are we near land?" she asked timidly. I pointed to the far horizon. "Brittany's there," I said. She contemplated the distance in silence, and then,

"Shall we be there soon?" she inquired.

"In a couple of hours if we keep on this course. But I'm not in the secrets of the captain—or even of Mr. Alston."

She glanced at me with a puzzled expression, and bit her lip. "You say that—" she began and stopped. "Why do you say that?" she asked.

"Because," I replied, "Mr. Alston has changed his plans. He has refused to yield to the exactions of a pirate, which meant practical blackmail, for more than a week, and now he is beaten to his knees and yields with a smile."

"He yields for my sake," she said indignantly.

"He should have done that sooner then," I said, "and saved you all this pain and distress."

She was silent, and, feeling a little ashamed of myself, I went on: "One thing we must do on landing, and that is at once send a cable to Mrs. Lovell, letting her know you are safe."

"Oh yes," she said eagerly, "Oh please do. I

have some money, at least I shall have when I get back."

"No doubt Mr. Alston will settle all that," I remarked.

She was silent again, and presently said in another voice, "Oh, I wish all this bartering about me was over. I hate it. I hate it. Why should I be dragged into it? I have nothing to do with their Montana mines."

The outbreak surprised me, and I will admit it warmed me. "I gather it is all over now," I said soothingly.

"It should never have been," she said passionately and turned away. The child had a glimpse of the woman, and stood on that dignity of muliebrity. She was outraged in her feelings, and she claimed her sex's right of resentment. I could not be sorry that she took it that way, though I had nothing to say.

The schooner arrived at Quiberon before seven, and almost ere she dropped anchor a boat put out from the port.

"I guess that's the boss," remarked Butterfield, as we leaned over the side. "Weeds don't grow under him." He was right in his conjecture, for so soon as the boat drew near enough, manned by Breton hands, I recognised the sturdy form of Rudgwick in the stern. He ascended to the deck without a word, and nodded to Butterfield.

"Got back, Nathaniel?" he said cavalierly. "Glad to see you Lieutenant. That you Fordyce? Well, how do we stand?"

"Wilson, I reckon I'm going to hitch up a team with you," said Alston smiling, "We're too good to pull different ways."

"If you call time, Fordyce, I've no doubt we can fix it," said the pirate imperturbably. He took his cigar from his teeth, and nodded to the captain.

"You're a pretty blamed fool, Jude, at your time of life, to be shanghaied," he remarked bluntly, and passed on without waiting an answer.

I saw Alston's blue eyes agleam, and his white teeth showed under his moustache. "Never you mind the old man, Jude," he said. "He's raw."

The skipper grunted but made no intelligible answer, and Alston followed his adversary aft where Butterfield was talking to him.

"Say, Fordyce, how's the young lady?" called out Rudgwick, "I'd like to pay my respects to her."

Alston went to the door of the state-room, and opened it. "Sylvia," he called, "here's Mr. Rudgwick would like to see you. He's all right."

Rudgwick's thick frame blocked the doorway as Miss Lovell appeared. He took off his cap. "I hope they've made you as comfortable, Miss Lovell, as I did," he said. "If they haven't

they'll smart. I'll put an extra screw on Fordyce. The only thing I regret is that you didn't get the pleasure trip in the Mediterranean I promised you."

The girl threw at him a sharp glance of scorn and fury, which would have stabbed anyone of more sensitive fibre than Rudgwick; and then she passed out on deck and moved away without a word of answer. Rudgwick replaced his cigar grimly.

"Wilson, you know a lot, but you don't know women," said Alston. "See, what's the matter with our doing business now?"

"My son, I'm waiting for you," said the arch-enemy, and the two passed into the cabin.

I came upon Miss Lovell leaning over the schooner's side, her rich brown hair taking the gold of the setting sun. She started up and her eyes were bright with rage.

"How dare that man address me?" she asked. "How dare he? I wish he were dead. He has put me to every indignity. I wish I had never seen—" she broke off.

"It is his idea of business, I suppose. And now he's won he is willing to be friendly."

"Friendly," she laughed furiously. "And they're talking business now, I suppose. That's all Americans ever seem to care about. Thank God—" again she broke off.

"I'm going ashore to send a cable to Mrs. Lovell," I said.

"Thank you," she said, throwing off her mood, "and I shall be glad, Mr. Kerslake, if you'll make inquiries about the way of getting back. I suppose I can get to Cherbourg, and thence to Southampton."

"I will certainly inquire," I told her, "but doubtless Mr. Alston will make all arrangements."

She said nothing, and Alston at the moment came up. His business with Rudgwick had not taken him long, and he was in a state of mellowed satisfaction.

"That concludes the act," he observed. "Sylvia, old girl, you'll be landed in the Island in no time. Kerslake, we stand your debtors."

I explained what Miss Lovell wanted, and he nodded. "I'll fix that for you directly we get ashore, and also the trains. We can get a car through, I believe. But we can't go to-night. Rudgwick wants to give a little dinner in celebration of the terms of peace and—"

But she broke out, "I will not. How can you think of it? I will have nothing to do with that infamous man."

"Now, my dear girl," said he, listening patiently to her, "I'm not going to say there isn't reason in what you feel about Rudgwick. Because there is. It was right down rascally of him

to drag you into this. But look at it from my point of view, Sylvia; and I think that's worth considering. It's I too who ought to cut up rough over this. I had a safe thing on, and he came in and tried to spoil it. I fought and I lost. I could have carried it on to the end, but that would have been to sacrifice you, my dear, and that wouldn't work. So I'm ceding a point to Wilson for your sake and if I can afford to smile, I reckon you can, Sylvia. Not but what I'll get home on him some day. I'm not forgetting any of this—not I by a sight."

She answered nothing, and I wondered if she felt, as I did, that his plea was unworthy. It seemed to me once more to smell of money, and as if he was not conscious of the tremendous disparity between commercial considerations and pure sentiment.

"What do you say, Kerslake?" he appealed to me.

"I am content to let Miss Lovell judge for herself," I said quietly.

She turned suddenly to him. "Very well," she said quietly. "It shall be as you wish."

"That's right. And now, don't think I'm going to let you be guest in the place where you've been prisoner. No; I've fixed up with Rudgwick that he's to give us dinner in Quiberon. He can fix it at his inn." The man himself emerged slowly and strolled towards us.

"Eight sharp, Fordyce," he called. "I've sent Butterfield ashore with the word."

"Butterfield?" said Alston, and then with a smile, "Now, I wonder if he'll make us an omelette."

What was there in the word and in the smile that made me wonder? "You can't make an omelette without breaking eggs"—the old saw came to my mind. There was something surely ominous in Butterfield's omelettes. But this was the last.

At eight we dined in the *Petits Oiseaux*, by which time I found that Miss Lovell had been able to effect a change in her toilette. She still wore the Breton dress, but it had been refurbished and decorated with the aid of a good deal of taste and (I found later) of a little money. The dinner was rather more of a success than that to which she, Alston and I had sat down on the previous evening, for here at least were two diners quite at their ease and very friendly. Rudgwick went out of his way to be very entertaining and very attentive. Now that peace was signed he was an ally, an ally at any rate of Alston, whose prowess at large he celebrated.

"There's no man who would have put up a fight such as you did, Fordyce," he remarked, "and I say it before Miss Lovell. You had me fairly cornered once, and I knew it, and I guess

you knew it? Well, it's over now, and you can fix me up as best man, if you're not going to take on Mr. Kerslake here."

Miss Lovell's embarrassment showed in her face, and I felt myself glowing with unreasonable indignation. Only Alston was imperturbed, though he cast two quick glances at the girl and myself.

"It's time you had a holiday, Wilson," he said easily. "You've been on the strain too long. I guess we won't keep you in Europe any more."

Rudgwick laughed. "I'm going for a holiday, you bet," he said. "I'm going for that Mediterranean trip which I wanted to give Miss Lovell. Say," he interrupted himself suddenly, "will you take the yacht, Fordyce, for your honeymoon? I'll lay her up in Nice for you any day you name, while I go along to New York. I've got to get back to Chicago next month anyway."

Again Miss Lovell's cheeks flew her signals of distress and I broke in on this inopportune conversation with some violence.

"The memories of your schooner, Sir," said I, "are hardly likely to commend themselves to Miss Lovell."

"No," he considered. "Never struck me that way; though you're right. Anyway, the offer's on, Fordyce, if you want it." He rang the bell. "We can do with some wine, pop, I reckon.

Fordyce, empty that glass. You're not a tee-totaler to-day." He had drunk a good deal of champagne himself, and was far more talkative than usual, while Alston made but a feint of drinking. Miss Lovell took nothing, and sat almost silent, resenting the situation, as I saw. It was beyond doubt that, while she had impulsively given in to Alston's request, he had made a mistake in pressing her. I met her eyes once as Rudgwick related some commercial deal of his experience, and they had raked his face with contempt, a contempt which had scarcely died out of them when our glances encountered. She flushed and then paled. I would have given much to have been able to release her from that disagreeable situation. Alston, if I read him aright, was a better judge of men than women. His glances began to visit her face from time to time, but he did not appear to be conscious of her feelings, although he displayed a little anxiety towards the end of the dinner. For the most part, however, he exchanged jest and memory with Rudgwick.

"Where's Butterfield?" he demanded presently.  
"He's gone aboard," said Rudgwick, "I've not had him to valet my affairs for some little time, and I've missed him."

"Oh!" said Alston, staring hard at him, and then: "Guess you find him useful."

"He's my mental valet," said he other. "He goes all right."

"Well," said Alston after a pause, "that means we must go without that omelette, I suppose." His even teeth showed handsomely, and his blue eyes shone, as he glanced round the table, as if inviting us to be amused.

Yet Alston had not been so blind to Miss Lovell's sentiments as I had imagined; which I discovered through overhearing some words between them later. Rudgwick, who had got to the stage of coffee and cognac, meditated drowsily over an illustrated French journal, and I had gone to discover my bedroom. As I came into the dark passage through the low doorway I caught the sound of Alston's voice from an adjoining room in bad French.

"Mademoiselle desired to see her room, Madame." There was a moment's silence, and then he spoke again, this time in English.

"Sylvia girl, I'm afraid you didn't enjoy your dinner."

"How could I?" she asked in a low voice, which nevertheless penetrated the thin boarding.

"Well, I'm real sorry. I'd a notion you'd work into it. But see, I've done with Rudgwick now. This squares us, and we start again. This last week has been a busy week, and I don't think it would have been more exciting in Wall

Street. But it's over now, and we're quits; and I've got you."

His voice was caressing, and hers in reply was agitated. "It has been good of you. I have cost you too much. I haven't really thanked you. I know you've done heroic things for me and made great sacrifices. I have cost you too much."

"I would purchase you at ten times the cost, Sylvia," he said softly; and at that, for all my heart was sore, and my blood pulsing, I knew I was eavesdropping, and I passed on.

Rudgwick, cigar between his teeth, was contemplating the ceiling in the room in which we had dined. His expression was calm and peaceful, as of a man who has attempted and achieved something, and thus earned his night's repose. He took his cigar from his mouth and addressed me when I entered.

"This has been an amusing little interlude, Mr. Kerslake, and I'm indebted to it for your acquaintance. If you ever come across the way, you look up Wilson Rudgwick, and you'll have a good time. I like a good fighter. Seems to me," he went on reflectively, "seems to me very much as how Fordyce wouldn't have had a show but for you. But I guess I'll let him down lightly, as he's taken it well."

Peace and good-will apparently reigned in the theatre of this extraordinary struggle, and in the

hearts of these remarkable men. I could not pretend to understand them, nor do I know that I much wanted to. At least it was not of them that I thought as I turned in that night. It was twelve o'clock, and the stars were in the Bay. In the room next to mine, separated from me by but a match-board partition, slept Sylvia Lovell. The game seemed to be drawing to its close, and it was not I who was the winner. Alston had behaved admirably in his defeat, and had made a good impression on me, and (I could not avoid seeing) on Miss Lovell also. However much she distasted his characteristic devotion to "business" she must have been impressed by his hard struggle for her and his generous and good-tempered surrender. I felt that night that I had lost my chances, and looking out on the lapping water, was disconsolate. The dawn was not far distant, and the breeze came off the sea cool and refreshing. It did not refresh my spirits. My mind went back to that dawn in the Island, when I had been fired to exalted hopes, and I saw again that springing tender plant in the garden by the pergola. If seed had been sown there in my heart it was destined to shoot, but to decay and die. The sound of her breathing might almost have reached me in the silence of the night, but she was parted from me by destiny, by the implacable turn of Fate.

As I looked out in this mood I was aware of a noise without. It caught my ear, held it, and then passed. I turned again to the window, and pulling the curtains crept into bed.

But I did not sleep for a long time. The stairs creaked with the feet of guests no doubt retiring to their rooms, or I reflected, it might be the landlord and his wife seeking their chamber after the labours of the day. I tossed under a single sheet, for the night was warm, and at last got up in my restlessness and gazed out again at the prospect. The light was grey on the water, and a little way from the shore a boat moved without sound into the Bay. I thought I could recognise the dim bulk of the schooner further out. I went to bed once more, and at last I slept.

I was awakened, as it seemed to me, unduly early by someone moving in the room, and I sat up.

"So you are here," said Rudwick's voice more than ordinarily brusque. "Damned if I didn't think you were in it. But I guess you're left."

"What is it?" I asked stupidly.

His face, thin-lipped, black-avised, and grim was turned on me with a sort of leer; it was a pulp of indeterminable expression.

"Where did Miss Lovell sleep last night?" he asked harshly. I indicated the wall.

"The room on the right," I said.

He strode out, and I heard him turn a handle. I leapt out of bed and began to dress hastily, not knowing what had upset him, and in a tangle of anxiety. Rudgwick came back.

"He's right!" he said. "He's cleared sure enough, and the girl with him. Damn his eyes."

I was staggered, but I recaptured my commonsense. "No doubt it was settled between them," I said. "It may even be that they were tired of you."

It was an obvious sarcasm, and his half grin appeared.

"And of you?" he said interrogatively. "Well, you'd better take both barrels. It's worse for me. The schooner's gone."

"What!" I said, and sprang to the window. It was true. I turned a bewildered questioning gaze on him. "You see," he said slowly, "Fordyce Alston's a very clever man, and he's tried euchre on me. But I don't think it will work."

"But how—?" said I. "Do you mean he has run off with the schooner?"

"And the girl," he added, and more abruptly: "Look here, we've got to talk. Get your clothes on and come along down. I'll order déjeuner, or whatever they call their damned breakfast. Smart's the word."

With that he left me, a prey to the most elusive emotions.

## CHAPTER XVI

### THE A. K. U.

It was not many minutes before I descended, and found Rudgwick seated at the table writing. A figure stood in the window in a dejected attitude which I immediately recognised as Butterfield's.

"Cable that and that," commanded Rudgwick, tossing over a paper. "Let that New York one go first. Get a move on you. Well, Lieutenant, what can I do for you?"

"I can't get the hang of this or of you," I said bluntly. "Perhaps you'll admit me to the explanation."

"Explanation!" he said, as Butterfield left the room. "Well, I guess it's about time. You're right. Fordyce has broken out of the ring, damn him. We've got to get to explanations."

"You say he has gone off with your yacht. What does that mean, and why should he do it, when he had all he wanted?"

"You think he had," said this intriguer, rolling a cigar between his fingers. "Well, he didn't seem to think so. What do you make of that?"

He threw me a piece of paper, which I picked up and read. It ran as follows:

*"I'm sending this by a faithful hand, Wilson, same hand as you did yours. Guess I came up fresh in the last round. No doubt we'll meet in New York. So long."*

I read it aloud still in perplexity, but Rudgwick's face blazed, and his voice thundered.

"Last round! By God, he broke the ropes, and it ain't the last round. I'll chase him round the ring, and make him beg for mercy; by God, I will."

I stared. "Butterfield brought that to me half an hour since," he said, returning to his normal tone. "He was caught and tied aboard the schooner—the only faithful hound left—'among the faithless faithful only he.' Isn't that how she goes? Alston put him ashore. He's bought Jude, by Heaven, Jude that I raised from Hell, Jude that's sold me, and Jude that earns his own damnable name. Thirty pieces of silver! They were always on sale for that, every man of the kidney. Well, I might have known Jude. By gosh!" he actually smiled. "Fordyce must have paid heavy for that."

His yacht had been stolen, as he had stolen the bride of his adversary. That was all it came to in my eyes, and I saw no undue dipping of the

balance. The scales returned. I considered him with some anxiety that was right on the surface of more disturbing emotions. I wondered at the outbreak of a grim silent man for inconsiderable reasons.

"Well, you can easily get your yacht back," I said without sympathy, "and no doubt your skipper has given himself away. He is quite at your mercy."

Rudgwick contemplated me with a dispassionate scrutiny, and apparently came to the same conclusion.

"No; I had my doubts about you, Lieutenant," said he, "but I was a fool. I might have guessed at Alston better. He always used people, and the less he paid the better it tickled him. There's some blamed coffee somewhere. Sit down and have some. We got to talk."

I obeyed, though I could not in the least understand at what he was driving.

"I begin to see where you come in, my friend," he pursued, puckering his forehead. "You're the *jeune premier* of the piece, so to speak." He laughed. "Well, I don't mind that. It's not a part I hanker after, but I'm not saying it isn't showy. However, the main thing is to clear the track, and I suspicion where you stand. All right. Now we'll go into this, my son. Fordyce Alston has gone back on our agreement, and that

absolves me. I go back on mine. The contract's off, for good and all."

I stared. "You mean the Montana mine?" I asked.

A grim smile distorted his face. "I take no stock in mines. That was the bluff. Say, ever hear of the A. K. U?"

I shook my head.

"Well, there's more than you that's never heard of it, but I guess it's well enough known on your Stock Exchange," he said with some evident contempt for my ignorance. "The A. K. Union's a road with a future, and that future is to be marked out by prudent management and a head. It isn't a booby that can run the A. K. U."

My head began to swim. Was he out of his senses, or was I? What was all this ineffectual nonsense about A. K. U? His voice went on evenly:

"Then I take it you never heard of the president either? Never heard of President Lovell?"

Suddenly my head cleared. What was that name? My eyes and ears were attention. I stared.

"J. P. Lovell," he went on, "has been president for the last ten years. He and I had some deals together long since, way back when I was raw, and he got the better of me. And I won't say we

haven't worked together since, and made a tidy pile. But the old man's petered out before his time. I guess he's about 65 but he's at the end of his tether." He knocked the ash from his cigar. "I don't say," he resumed meditatively, "that I couldn't have worked the old man, if he'd been in proper health and senses, but he isn't; and so I had to go about it other ways. I operate in railway stocks, Mr. Kerslake, more than's good for me, perhaps. But I like it, and it's a recreation from wheat in Chicago. And besides it works in. There's the South Western road that comes in mighty useful in that wheat business, and it would come in more mighty useful if we could get it improved. "That depends," he looked at me squarely, "on the A. K. U. I guess you begin to see now."

I didn't; I was still in a maze; but what had dawned upon me was that there was a profounder mystery behind the abduction and the prolonged hostilities of these two men than I had hitherto imagined.

"Well, no, you haven't got hold of the real key yet. I'll come along to that presently," said Rudgwick. "Anyway, keep fixed on to this, that I wanted a hold on the A. K. U. in the interests of the South Western. See? I'm taking off the mask, and appearing naked now. The time's come for that. Well, the old man holds the

controlling interest in the A. K. U. and I dickered with him, but he wouldn't. I don't say I couldn't have pulled it off in time if I'd had time. But his lease is out, his sands are at the last ebb, and the plain fact is that he can't do business, *compos mentis*. That's what's depressed the stock. Know what the fall's been? No, you wouldn't. It's packed away in financial corners which no gentleman reads, only poor operators and such hang-dogs. A. K. U's flat on the illness of President J. P. Lovell. It's no concern to you, but it means something to us. Anyway, J. P. Lovell being incompetent for a deal, it had to be done another way. And here's where we get warm, and where your friend and ally, Fordyce Alston, comes in.

"Old man Lovell came from England, same as me, and like me, I guess he's been over there long enough to know better. But he's gotten in his dotage a belated affection for his English relations, and he's made a will in favour of them."

Rudgwick paused almost with a dramatic instinct. I was aware that he was watching me shrewdly.

"Go on," I said quickly.

"At least his will is in favour of his niece, Sylvia Rosamund Lovell, daughter of his brother, Captain Richard Lovell. And he has no kith or kin of his own in America."

Again he paused, as if to let the meaning of his words and their significance sink into my mind.

"Miss Lovell is heiress to President Lovell of the A. K. U.," I summed up.

"Precisely, and she don't know it, nor her mother, nor anyone but—me and—Fordyce Alston."

I sat upright. Alston!

"Who is Alston?" I demanded.

"Fordyce," said Rudgwick, examining the top of his cigar, "is a plunger who has made two or three fortunes and lost 'em. Fordyce is the nephew of the late Mrs. J. P. Lovell."

"Oh!" I exclaimed, and of a sudden the light broke upon me fully.

"You see, Fordyce and I got to know about the will pretty much the same time, only he bluffed me off about knowing. Anyway he made a quicker bee-line than I did, and that's how he got in first."

I remembered the wind on the downs, and the blown skirts of Sylvia Lovell with her bright and beautiful eyes; I recalled the meeting with the tall stranger from America with his debonair and easy manner; and there came back to me the memory of my surprise at that precipitate engagement, engineered, as I saw now, by an unscrupulous rascal with the tacit assistance of a foolish and anxious mother. The mists that had enshrouded this adventure up till now dispersed of a sudden,

and the whole affair emerged to me in the light of a sordid struggle between these two men for the possession of the heiress's millions. I recalled now that scrap of paper I had found in the fireplace, and the tenor of its contents. I was angry, I was furious, and I showed it.

"My obvious duty," I said, "is to cable to Mr. J. P. Lovell putting him in possession of all the facts."

"Too late, my son," he responded indifferently, "J. P's never going to put pen to paper again. He's beyond it. Besides, what good would it do with Fordyce married to the girl? I take it that's what you don't want."

He was right. I wanted it, if it were possible, a thousand times less than ever. I wanted to be up and about. I longed for action. But Rudgwick sat there coolly, "sizing me up," as it were.

"I guess he's got a pull on you," he observed. "He's been set up for hers by all this. That's me, like a blamed fool, that I was to put faith in him. But I didn't know he would go so far as this and, damn him, I'll break him for it."

His voice rose in a volume of anger as he made this asseveration, but as rapidly subsided.

"Now, I'm going to make a move, Lieutenant. In fact I've begun to move. I cabled to New York, to be sure, some inquiries about the old man. Well, if you're coming in, I'll take you along. I

don't deny, you will be very handy to me, seeing how you stand."

"That is," said I, "you want me to rake your chestnuts out of the fire."

He laughed. "I've not been in business twenty years for nothing," he returned, "and I'm not looking upon you as a born fool. I know how the wind blows with you, and I'm reckoning on your co-operation. But I tell you frankly, I don't give a damn cent if I don't get it. I'm going to crucify Fordyce anyway. See here," he went on as I made no reply, "I want you to see the worst, and that's why I've told you all this. I'll tell you some more, and you'll probably be hotter against me than you are. That's all right. This isn't a show game or a bluff; it's real war. There's one or two things maybe are puzzling you. Here's one. What was I after in the Island? Well, I reckon I'm not a beauty, but I have my chances, and I'm a bachelor. There was a sport over your way by name of Wilkes who backed himself to marry any woman if he'd half an hour's start. That's me. But you see I didn't get that start. Alston got it, and he'd won ere I toed the mark. That left me at the post as you may say. So I did the best I could. I took the stakes away. Stands to reason Fordyce couldn't marry the girl if she wasn't there, and by God I'd have held her till he gave in, and did."

He frowned. "Ah, you came to terms," said I dryly.

"That's so. He gave in. Smart man, Fordyce. Conceded like a lamb. I ought to have smelt a rat, but I didn't. I reckon I was too complacent. He offered me the A. K. U. voting block, and an option at prices which were pretty right. Practically I made my own terms. And now, mud's my name, eh?"

"But you have the agreement," I said.

"Mud's my name," he repeated sardonically. "Fordyce is away with the schooner and my private bureau including the agreement. Simple, isn't it? I'm left on the shore. Now, what say? Are you coming in?"

I laughed. "I am to assist one scoundrel with my eyes open after having been made a tool of by another," I said bitterly.

"Well, you can put it that way, if you're scrupulous," he assented without taking offence. "Only you're playing with a straight man this time. You can look before you leap, only we've got to leap soon. I'm putting all in your hands. I size you up, Lieutenant. I want to get back on the man who's broken the ropes. I don't say anything about the A. K. U. But maybe when it comes to be a bit later we can make a deal over that. Anyway, I'm going to break Fordyce, if I lose over it."

For a moment I sat considering, and then I knew that I could not refuse. This man was offering me his assistance to keep Sylvia Lovell from marriage with an unscrupulous adventurer.

"I agree," I said. "But I will make no conditions, even if I were in the position to do so."

"That's all right," he nodded. "I reckon the conditions will make themselves as we go along."

Here Butterfield entered, restless and perturbed, but watchful of his master.

"Get those off?" inquired the latter. "Well, you've got to hustle, Nathaniel. I'm not going to be beat, and Mr. Kerslake stands in to prevent it." He grinned at us. "Get a move on you. What time's that train?" Butterfield told him. "Just as we are we've got to start, Mr. Kerslake."

"Where will you go?" I asked, curious to learn his plans.

"I guess we'll try London for a change," he observed.

"London!" I echoed. "But surely Alston will not venture to England in the circumstances."

"My dear sir," said he dryly, "when I wanted to get outside the law I came away here. If I'd wanted to stay inside the law I would have been in England. I guess Alston wants the inside of the law now."

"But he has stolen your yacht," I said.

Rudgwick shook his head. "My son, we're not

arguing before a judge now. We're talking sense. How do you suppose I'm going to see this thing placarded over Europe, and looking at me from scare-heads in New York? No; this affair's going to be pulled off quite privately, as furtively as you like, by your leave. I abduct and go abroad; Alston wants to marry, so he goes to civilisation. I've got a certain respect for the old laws left myself. I've got a limit somewhere inside my waistcoat."

"Very well," I said. "You know your kind best. I'll act under you for the present. But the time may come when I take first hand. I'm warning you."

He glanced at me critically. "I daresay that'll suit me," he said. "Anyway we'll start it at that."

It was thus decided forthright that we should go to London to begin our operations in revenge on his part, in remedy on mine. Butterfield faithfully followed "the boss," and proved astonishingly helpful. He was always at hand with some suggestion, or anticipating some need. If ever there was a better handy man I have never seen him. As was his custom he talked a good deal, which was in contrast with his "boss." I think he had despaired at the first shock of the news, and perhaps he regarded himself as in some degree responsible for the disaster. He had not the

sturdy vitality of more confident people, and was easily affected. He responded to reverses like a thermometer, but to success also; and with the solid assurance of Rudgwick before him he took heart and rose buoyantly to the occasion.

"I'll bet the boss pulls this off," he told me as we crossed from St. Malo. "If he grits his teeth he's not going to be under dog; and Alston's riled him, by gum, riled him pretty badly. It was a mean trick of Alston's to play on us, right down shabby. But I never took much stock in him. Not but what he's clever enough."

I had almost grown accustomed to this remarkable way of looking at things, and sometimes I saw its amusing side. They were narrow, these singular people, narrow by the very apparent breadth and tolerance of their views. They saw life in a circumscribed vista, one thing and no more, and they set their actions by it. They played a game with certain rules, and an infraction of these rules was penalised; but provided the protagonists kept the terms of the conflict, all that ensued was right and proper. It was war; and after all it had its counterpart on our own Stock Exchange. It was only that in America it was more obvious, and more frankly acknowledged. Even piracy may be conditioned into a systematic game—if you are prepared to pay the penalties which civilisation will necessarily exact.

Alston and Rudgwick were not pirates, but in a sense they were privateers. They were in commission against one another, and they respected the rules. At least they had done so, until this treacherous departure of Alston. And for the time being I was sailing under the privateer's flag.

I had discharged the yawl at Quiberon, for whatever might befall we had no likelihood of requiring that impotent boat. Indeed at first sight it seemed that we had abandoned the sea altogether. Rudgwick, I concluded, was probably right in his conjecture that Alston would come to England to be married, but the task was where to find him? It was formidable, but was attacked by the two Americans with characteristic vigour and haste. Money was no object, in the familiar phrase. Telegrams were dispatched in dozens to every port in England, and agents were provided everywhere. Rudgwick, within four and twenty hours of his arrival in London, had all the resources of civilisation at his back. He was in a black mood all that first day, and would hardly throw me a word. He ate very little, and drank nothing, but sat and wrote, and thought and smoked big cigars hour after hour, the grim lines grimmer than ever on his saturnine face. Butterfield was comparable only to Mercury, that god of quick service. He came and went, he talked.

when he got the opportunity, and he remained as cheerful as his "boss" was sombre.

In the meantime, if you please, we stayed at the Carlton, as if we were enjoying ourselves. For myself I will admit that I was far from doing that. I had no part to play at this juncture; I was only under orders, to await orders; and I got none. Probably Rudgwick considered me of no use to him. I do not know. All I do know is that I grew very restive and impatient at the inaction, and that I dared not think of the event which I was aware even at that moment might have already closed my adventure and rendered my mission vain.

On the second day Butterfield vanished, and Rudgwick relaxed. He drank a small bottle of champagne at lunch, and took interest in the people at the tables.

"This is pretty fair," he remarked critically. "But it ain't up to Delmonico's." Being English-born, as he had already explained, he allowed himself the privileges of a candid friend. "And I guess it's our people who mostly make this smart. There's a pretty girl for you, Kerslake. But I suppose there's only one for you, and she's not hereabouts. Well," he turned a whimsical gaze on me. "It's about time we got tracks of her."

It seemed almost as if it had been manipulated

with a dramatic intent, but I believe it was mere coincidence. Coincidence, as Rudgwick told me on our journey that night, had usually favoured him. The gods fight with the heavy battalions. At any rate the messenger arrived opportunely, almost to the word, and Rudgwick took the brown envelope deliberately, opened it and read the telegram.

"We pick up the trail at St. Ives," he remarked, his accent emerging thick and heavy. He tossed the paper to me, and I read eagerly.

*"Schooner reported off Sennen, working north.  
Come St. Ives, BUTTERFIELD."*

Energy and money had once more triumphed, but how far would that triumph extend? There was no answer to that interesting question yet.

## CHAPTER XVII

### RUNNING THE BLOCKADE

IT was in the train that Rudgwick aired his views on coincidence. "Providence," he put it, "serves with the eagles, and you'll find its banners along with the standards of the strong. Otherwise there wouldn't be any top-dog at all, and I reckon the world's built on other people's adversities and necessities. What do you and I live on? Life. We're predatory; and what do the sheep and the bullock live on? Life again. We're predatory all round. Dog eats dog, and the battle's to might not right, though it's not always to the strong. Curious, when you come to tick it up, how prejudiced morality is. You can do wholesale what you can't do retail. I reckon there's stupidity in it and custom. Now, they'll let me quite comfortably, if I wanted to, go on selling low-flash oil here and killing and maiming a lot, but they wouldn't get over this kidnapping business. I can poison a score of men with bad canned food and forty-rod whiskey, and none will hiss at me when I walk to church on Sundays, but let me draw on an enemy openly at twenty

paces, and they put a rope round my neck. A damned odd world! Providence," he concluded reflectively, as he lay back in his corner. "works a lot of coincidences. It's a coincidence you're here. What the devil have we to do with each other?"

It was not civil, but it was so true that I overlooked the brusqueness of it. What had we in common, we who had one end in common?

Rudgwick slept and I pondered, and wondered, and forecast and hoped and thrilled all through the night.

Arrived at St. Ives with the sun well in heaven we were met by a messenger from Butterfield, who had gone up the coast, and left word for us to that effect. The schooner had passed in the offing without making the little harbour as he had thought possible; and so he had gone on to Perranporth.

We reached Perranporth by carriage an hour or two later and made at once for the little inn that stands on the foreshore. The blue waters of the Atlantic broke upon the segment of beach with a sonorous tumult. It was a bright morning and the breath of June was in the air. At the inn we found Butterfield who welcomed his "boss" with an account of his adventures. Reports from Falmouth had been the inspiration of his journey to the west and he had arrived to discover the

*Mermaid* signalled off Land's End. Thence he traced her to St. Ives.

"She's northering," said Butterfield, pointing seaward, "but she ain't in a hurry any."

We looked through the windows of the inn and lo, there was a black-hulled schooner standing lazily out.

"I reckon Alston's got a riddle to solve," chuckled the factotum.

"How so?" asked Rudgwick.

"Well, he fixed it up to land at St. Ives, and he pretty near did so, only I put up a danger signal."

"Eh?" said Rudgwick sharply.

"Why yes, boss," said the other explanatorily but with independence of tone. "You see, he calculated to land there, and conclude the business. I couldn't interfere if he did, and so I gave him a fright." Rudgwick was listening intently. "He came ashore in a boat, and the first face he saw there was mine. Oh Alston's a polite man, and he's a clever one. He never turned a hair, though I had thrust myself through the fishermen and stood full in his optics."

"'Well, isn't it real nice meeting old friends, Butterfield,' says he, as cool as you like, and he shows his teeth pleasantly. By gosh, I wouldn't like them just fastened in me. 'Friend Nathaniel,' said he, 'is this France or England, and what the hell's the language for damn?' Oh, he's

smart. He stepped ashore and took me up to the hotel, and didn't ask any questions. He took it all for granted. 'Where the jackal is,' he said, 'there ought to be big game. I wish I'd brought my rifle.' I gave him no answer but a laugh, and he laughed. 'Tell Wilson,' says he, 'that he's a gem in his way, but I'm going to get the curtain down on me in a proper fashion. So long,' says he, and off he went, back to the schooner."

Rudgwick was pondering; it was I who spoke.

"Butterfield was right. The man has a special licence and could be married out of hand. He would have been had Butterfield not shown himself."

"Oh, that's all right," agreed Rudgwick, "He was afraid of pushing things too far."

"I guess he didn't know you weren't here," remarked his man.

"And yet what use could we be against his designs?" I asked despondently. "You a man discredited by your previous conduct, and I—a—a-stranger?"

"You might come in handy, seeing *your* previous record of chivalrous conduct," said Rudgwick in the sneer which was merely the statement of facts, "and I don't go into a fight without arms. See here." He pulled some papers from his jacket. "Did you think I was having a nice

little holiday in London? No, my son, here's documentary evidence cabled from America, first regarding Lovell's will, second as to the affairs of Mr. H. Fordyce Alston, and third—well, some other little matters which we needn't go into. Anyway, they'd wreck Fordyce, wreck him in a brace of shakes with any decent-minded girl. Reckon he's broke through the ropes and I'm going to wipe the floor with him. I'll knock him out, anyway."

He folded the papers carefully and replaced them in his pocket. "Say, Butterfield," he said sharply, "where's she going? You, Lieutenant, this is your shop. Where's she bound for?" He stared out of the window at the distant schooner which was making poor way in a light breeze.

"She might be going anywhere from here to John O'Groats," I answered.

"That so? What about a Scotch marriage?" he asked.

I shook my head. "Residence for a certain number of days is now exacted, and besides he holds a special licence which runs in England only."

"Then he won't go to Scotland, and we've circumscribed him between here and the Cheviots," said Rudgwick briskly. "That's to the good. We must track 'em along, boys."

There was no other course, and we started

shortly after lunch along the coast towards New Quay. The schooner made way very slowly, but all fear that we should lose her was dissipated by the fact that she was ill-provisioned.

"I provisioned her for a month or more," said Rudgwick, "and I reckon she's been five weeks out. So, Master Alston's got to keep in touch with shore. There's no ocean sailing for him."

In the circumstances there was no immediate cause for anxiety, and we took our way leisurely up the coast towards Devon. It was not the day that mattered; it was the night, and we all knew it. Rudgwick was inclined to be irritably sarcastic towards dusk, and when we dined at Padstow, he was frankly sour and malignant.

"How's the wind?" he demanded. "Guess she can double in this, can't she, Kerslake? Damn Fordyce; I wish I had his head in a vice. This suits him. This just suits his book. I shouldn't wonder if he had his spy-glass on us and was chuckling."

"It's practically a blockade he's running," I said, "and night's his best time."

"Damnation! don't I know that?" he snapped. "Tell me something else. Here, what's the use of you naval people if you don't know enough to meet an emergency? I'll run the whole show myself."

His impatient ill-temper served no purpose,

unless it were to bring out a latent side of his strange temperament. He bullied, he was in effect, a slave-driver, if things went wrong; but all the time his brains were seethingly active, and he cast about for expedients. At one time he thought of chartering the whole coast, but I pointed out the impossibility of such a scheme.

"This is not America," I told him, "this is Cornwall, and the fishermen have their rigid codes; they obey the law."

"Well," said he, with a grin, and a revulsion characteristic of him, "I reckon I'm better in Wall Street. The game's yours now. That's what you're for. I didn't take you in out of love. It's your turn."

"You took me in," I replied coolly, "as a useful counter, and I'm content to play that part so long as it fits in with my scheme. I warned you of that." He grunted. "And, now, if you please, I'll take command."

"Right, my son," he said, lighting his cigar, "Give me Fordyce's head on a charger, and you can name your price."

"It shall not be asked of you," I said. "Simplicity is the soul of every great invention. We want to prevent Alston from landing, or, if he lands, keep on his track. We can watch him in the daylight, but in an hour's time he will be able to elude us, unless—"

"Go on," he said shortly.

"Unless we get near enough to watch him still."

He did not speak immediately and then, "Scott!" he exclaimed, "what a blamed fool you were not to think of that before! And as for you, Nathaniel Butterfield, if you were a nigger I'd tan the skin off you. Say, get away and secure a boat."

He spoke in great good-humor, for his quick mind had at once grasped the idea; and we had engaged a sailing boat ere half an hour was out.

The long ripple of the sea took us out in the dusk in the company of a stolid boatman who, from the ignorance of my comrades, was necessary to me in working the craft. The *Mermaid* stood some three miles out heading nor-nor-west, and we could not hope to overtake her if Alston intended to go farther. But if he did it would serve our purpose equally well, for it would mean that he had no design to land at Padstow or Bude that night. Yet I felt certain he would make the attempt. Indeed, I seemed to see ourselves in the rôle of Tantalus. He knew we were on the look-out for him, and he had probably kept in sight of land out of sheer wantonness. He could keep us on edge all day, and then slip in at night. The idea from what I knew of him would appeal to his pleasant sense of humor. I laid the boat's nose on her course and we moved

out on a growing breeze until we must have been two miles off shore, and were then in full darkness. The night was cloudy, and was only relieved by dotted lights in the distance that witnessed to the passage of ships or to some miscellany of houses on the coast.

One of the former brightened visibly as time went on, and presently we were able to make out a looming shape that noiselessly emerged from the greater darkness that invested the sea. We carried no light ourselves, greatly to the perturbation of our man, nor can I defend the omission save on the ground that it was absolutely necessary to our purpose.

As the shape went by I put my hand on Rudgwick's arm.

"It's the schooner!" I whispered.

"Is it?" he ejaculated, staring into the night, "Put her about, man."

"No; no; not yet," said I. "Leave it to me."

We ran a little longer on the tack and then came round. The light in the rigging of the *Mermaid* made a little dancing line of radiance in the water, and that we followed.

"She's not going for Padstow," I said, "or she would be on the other board."

"I don't care where she goes as long as we get there," remarked Rudgwick grimly.

We could not keep her pace and fell to the rear,

which made him mightily impatient, but I was not alarmed myself, for I knew I could stick to her and trace her, now I had once got her. There were not too many ports on that coast for a sailing vessel to make, and I should be able to give a good guess directly at her destination.

Presently the light obviously increased, and I wondered if she had come round, but in ten minutes it was clear what had happened. She was hanging in stays while a boat was put off. We had now the secret in our possession. Alston was to land by boat from the yacht in the dead of night, and we could not but come to the conclusion that he would not be alone. Sylvia Lovell would go with him!

I put the tiller over and we went about into the darkness, in which that eye of light still opened. I guessed we were within half a mile of the shore, and the breeze had stiffened so that we could soon cover that distance in the wake of the fugitive. The little noises of the quiet sea did not prevail to drown the sound of voices which reached us, and presently I was aware that the schooner was moving. She had launched her boat.

I, therefore, came over and took a board in the direction in which I conceived Alston was lying. So far as we could determine, his boat also carried no lights, but I did not mind that, for I could not

miss him now. He had given himself into my hands. I knew nothing of finance, of operations, or of Stock Exchange trickery; but if I knew anything I knew the sea, and I no more considered a leeshore in the dark with a freshening sou'wester than I would a game of football. There were risks but I knew where they lay, and I was confident of my ability to avoid them. Besides, that coast was familiar to me from several visits.

For some time we ripped through a swelling sea without event, and without news of our neighbours; and Butterfield began to display signs of uneasiness. He whispered to me, demanded if I was sure we were on the right course, and fidgetted in his seat. Rudgwick, on the contrary, was silent, and had recovered all his native calm. Once he spoke, and once only, which was to rebuke his subordinate curtly.

"Leave him alone, man. Can't you see he's at home? Buy the best man and trust him. That's the game; you're as restless as a cat. Curl up and go to sleep, and purr. We've got no use for you just now."

That settled Butterfield, if I may put it in that way, and I justified his master's faith very shortly afterwards by almost running down a boat.

"Steady!" sang out a voice. "Where the blazes is your light?"

"Where the blazes is yours?" shouted Rudgwick

with a chuckle. "Now, we lay on to them, Kerslake. That's Jude's bellow. I'd know it anywhere."

Silence had fallen after that exchange, but the boat was visible, dimly a shadow falling and rising on the sea. It seemed to hesitate, to have come to a pause; and then I heard a voice, which it was impossible to doubt, of pleasant quality even in its loudness.

"Rudgwick, that you?"

"I guess that curtain's near, Fordyce," shouted back Rudgwick. There was a pause again, and then the voice again.

"Kerslake there?"

"Guessed it in once," cried Rudgwick.

"Good. That's all I want to know," said Alston, and spoke in a lower voice. Immediately the blot that was his boat vanished; the shadow passed off the face of the sea. I hauled in the sheet to get nearer to the wind, and we ambled gently after her.

"Come to think of it," observed Rudgwick, "why did Fordyce want to know? I guess he guessed."

It was almost certain that he had done, yet he had advertised his knowledge to the night. Well, he had some reason which was not merely humourous; of that I was positive. Rudgwick was in high spirits.

"He's tantalised us a bit too much. He's run

it too fine," he said. "There's no margin; and that's a fact."

It seemed so, and yet nothing is beyond the possibility of accident and an accident came to his assistance. There was light enough to go by now from a breach in the clouds through which stars were shining, and we could see distinctly the schooner's boat, heavily rigged, making for the beach. The roar of the sea pounding on the sand was uppermost in the ears. We were but a hundred yards away, and our fugitive was gliding into the encompassing darkness halfway betwixt us and the shore. At that juncture one would have been sure of hitting them blindfold, and we were faster than they. I had given the tiller to our boatman with precise instructions, and had gone forward to the bows. We were near upon them in a stride, and then Jude (if it were he) coolly put his craft broadside to the rollers, and rode off to the north, rocking and floundering in the water.

It was a rash stratagem, but it succeeded so far as we were concerned. I would have followed him, but our cautious fisherman kept her nose straight. The result was that we grounded heavily at least thirty yards from them.

I was out on the sands in a moment, with the agile Butterfield at my heels, and we ran for the enemy.



**"I was out on the sands in a moment, with the agile Butterfield at my heels"**



"Miss Lovell!" I shouted.

"Damn it, you've missed them!" thundered Rudgwick.

The group of dim figures scattered, and when we reached the spot I could determine only the short sturdy form of the schooner's captain. The clamour of the sea was in my ears, and I could hear nothing else. Yet I carried in my mind a vague recollection of something flying along the sands. .... I dashed off for the cliffs which reared themselves a hundred yards away.

The bare scarp of the cliff was precipitous and broken, and though I tried half a dozen places I could find no means of scaling them. Butterfield had followed me, and we consulted hurriedly.

"No girl could climb this," said he. "They must have gone one way or the other along the beach."

"You go south, and I'll take the north," I answered. "They mustn't get away, or we're done."

We parted at that without more words, and I hastily followed the line of the cliffs northwards, ever keeping an eye to the possibility of ascent. What first gave me pause was a gaping cavern in the rocks which yawned blackly at me. Was it possible that the fugitives had concealed themselves in this? I was still wondering when a slight noise caught my ear, and I thought an elusive

figure flitted into the twilight of the beach. I darted after it, and, gaining a little, despaired it definitely. It turned a corner of road and vanished. I followed, and found the cliff here leaning landwards at an angle; also I heard noises above me. I set to work at once to climb.

It was hard work, groping in the darkness for edges of rock, and surrounding the interposing obstacles, but in a quarter of an hour I had gained the top, and heard the sound of voices in the distance. There was then more than one person, and I thought I knew who the other was. She fled from Rudgwick, and it dawned upon me, suddenly in the thrill of my pursuit—from me! That was the explanation of Alston's questions; that was his abominable cunning. Sylvia had every reason to dread re-capture by Rudgwick, the man who had abducted her so ruthlessly; and she found me now in association with him. She had no key to the secret, and it must have appeared to her that I had inexplicably joined her arch-enemy. She fled from me.

The thought infuriated me with Alston, and I redoubled my efforts to overtake them. The way lay across a series of grassy dunes, and was now plunged again in night. I moved swiftly, but uncertainly, stopping from time to time to listen. The dull roar of the water came to me now out of the distance from under the beetling cliffs, and some-

times I thought I heard a voice or the sound of feet. Once or twice it seemed to me that I caught sight of a figure, but it might have been the tussock-grass against the lighter sky. All I knew was that I blundered on in what I conjectured to be the track of the American, too full of the frenzy of the chase to turn back or despair.

It was after about an hour of wandering that I emerged upon a road, and ran into a stone fence. A point of light arrested my attention, and I groped my way towards it. It came, as I made out, from a cottage by the roadside, and I succeeded in stumbling to the doorway and knocked. The time must have been midnight or later, but the light showed that some one was about. I had by this time given Alston up, and the only thing left me was to get back to the shore and the boat.

The door was pulled ajar, and a candle flared on my face.

"Hast thou found me, O mine enemy?" asked a familiar voice.

It was Alston.

## CHAPTER XVIII

### THE COMING OF THE TIDE

He held the candle over his head, and I saw behind him a rough cottager who stared at me stupidly.

"Come in, Kerslake," went on Alston, "Come in. Our friend will doubtless make two comfortable as easily as one. I guess I'm thirsty after that run. So are you, I bet. I've been enquiring into the commissariat, and find there's home-brewed beer anyway—if not cyder. How's that?"

I entered almost mechanically, amazed at this apparition, and he closed the door.

"Say, this is real good of you," he said, addressing the labourer, "to take in two poor homeless strangers. And my friend and I feel very grateful." He put a piece of silver on the table. "But there's no need to keep you up. I reckon we can get along quite easy, if you'll point out the cyder. We'll just have a chat and a snooze in our chairs. This, Kerslake, is wayside hospitality in the old country."

In some wonder and with some reluctance our

host took himself off to his chamber, and Aiston, after pouring out a glass of cyder for each of us, sat down on the other side of the table from me. His eyes twinkled at me, as if he enjoyed a joke hugely.

"Where is Miss Lovell?" I demanded.

His eyes opened wider. "Do you suppose she'd be here?" he asked in surprise, "Do you reckon I'm going to run about the country with a delicate young girl at this time of night? Where do you suppose she is?"

"She landed with you," I declared.

"That so?" he said coolly. "Well, you ought to know best anyway. I was under the impression that Miss Lovell was comfortably aboard the *Mermaid*, the yacht so kindly placed at my disposal by my old friend, Wilson Rudwick."

I gazed at him. His face was a mask, but I had more than once seen passion bubble up in it, as I was destined to do yet again ere we were finished. Now that he put it in that way, bluntly, I had no proof, I had no evidence whatever, that Sylvia Lovell had come ashore. He saw that he had dumfounded me, and a smile played about his eyes.

"I don't disguise the fact that you and I are at loggerheads, Kerslake," he said. "You gave me to understand that some time ago. That's all right. I'm not blaming you any; and I reckoned when

I took French leave that you and Wilson would throw in your lots together. But all the same I don't see why we shouldn't come to an agreement."

"Your idea of life is one of barter," I said contemptuously.

"Compromise," he corrected; "life is all compromise, and there's no such thing as yea or nay, or black or white. There's mostly 'probablies' and greys. It don't do to criticise life too roughly. You can't put it under the microscope *en bloc*. Say, you're in this for sentiment; well so am I."

My disbelief appeared in my derisive smile. "You forget that I know the whole history of the affair from Rudgwick," I said.

"I hopped on to that. I know Wilson. He's mad as an old bear, isn't he? It won't do him any harm much. He's got to freeze me out yet, and he hasn't begun."

"You'll find it pretty difficult," I suggested. "You're marked."

He laughed, "Oh, I know Wilson. Got the whole apparatus at work, hasn't he? Spies in every port. He's a rare hand with the mechanism but he don't begin to use the spirit of the thing. Say, Kerslake, what are you going to do?"

"I'm going to prevent this marriage," I said firmly.

He mused. "You can do that for a time," he said, "but you won't pull it off altogether. Where's Wilson? and where's my friend Butterfield? Not waiting outside, eh?"

I shrugged my shoulders. He smiled. "Well, I'm going to have a little rest in this chair. You can please yourself. I don't mind your company. In fact I'll take it friendly if you'll come up with me to London in the morning."

"London!" I ejaculated, taken by surprise.

"London it is. I'm on business, and it's not unconnected with this little game, but I don't mind your company. It will while away the journey."

What did this mean? Was his offer genuine, and did he really desire me to leave the place? It sounded so offhand, for it would be awkward for him to travel with one professing open hostility and thus able to spy upon his actions. Then he must have a good reason for wishing me away from the coast. But on the other hand his plans were never simple, and he might have made the suggestion in the hope that I would suspect him, and refuse. Was Miss Lovell really aboard the schooner?

Suddenly, as he watched me, an idea possessed me. I think I gathered it from his brooding eyes. How was it that we had so surprisingly met there in that wayside cottage? Was it sheer coinci-

dence? I had chased him blindly in a blind night over the downs for an hour and we encountered fortuitously. No; there was something else in it to account for our meeting. Was it possible that he had left a trail all the way? Did he want to draw me aside? The truth flashed upon me, I say. He was the decoy. He had brought me here on purpose to fool me, as he had nearly succeeded in doing. There was the memory of two dim figures that fled in the night.

"I've come to the conclusion, Alston, that you're a very clever person," I said, "and I doubt my capacity to deal with you. I think on the whole, Rudgwick ought to play you, on the principle of setting a thief to catch a thief."

"You're not mighty thick then, you and Wilson," he said with a laugh.

"We are allies for the moment, and no more, in that we have the same object. But he's more of a kidney with you, and I think I'll leave you to him. If you had me, you'd trick me, and I think, moreover, I'm better at sea than on land."

He scrutinised me carefully. "Well, it don't make any odds," he said at last. "You can follow your own game. As for me, I'm going to enjoy a snooze."

He lay back in his chair, and I rose.

"I have no time for pleasure," I said, "I'm on the road."

"Going to look up Wilson?" he asked. "Give him my best regards. So long."

I opened the door of the cottage and went out. Night still reigned, but the horizon was murky blue. I walked along the road for a mile, and then, assuring myself that I was not followed, I turned across the dunes and struck out for the coast. I was bent now upon regaining the cove in which we had landed, for I felt that the solution of the riddle was to be found there. If not, at least I should be able to get on the track of my companions, and hear what their news was and communicate mine. I had no interest now in Alston. I distrusted him utterly, and I did not care whether he went to London or remained where he was. My business did not concern him, but Sylvia Lovell.

It was the best part of an hour before I reached the cliffs, and by that time the sky was lightening greyly in the east. The sea, a grey and restless mass below me, moaned in the ears. I walked along the cliffs for some time until I thought I recognised the scene of our disembarkment, and here I descended the precipitous face to the sands. It was half tide, and the waves came in with an increasing roar, breaking on the outlying point of rock that formed one limit of the little

bay. I made search from end to end but found no sign of living being. Butterfield and his master had vanished.

In the course of the third or fourth perambulation of the bay my eye was caught by a flicker of light, which seemed to be artificial, and I approached the spot cautiously. The sea covered the noise of my footsteps, and thus I was able to enter the mouth of a cavern without attracting attention. In a corner of the cave, retired from the outward view, sat Miss Lovell, a dull lantern burning by her side.

I knew her at once, though I could not see her face. Something in her leapt towards me and told me that it was she. My heart bounded. I had been right. I ran forward.

"Miss Lovell!" I shouted.

She got quickly to her feet and threw a frightened glance at me.

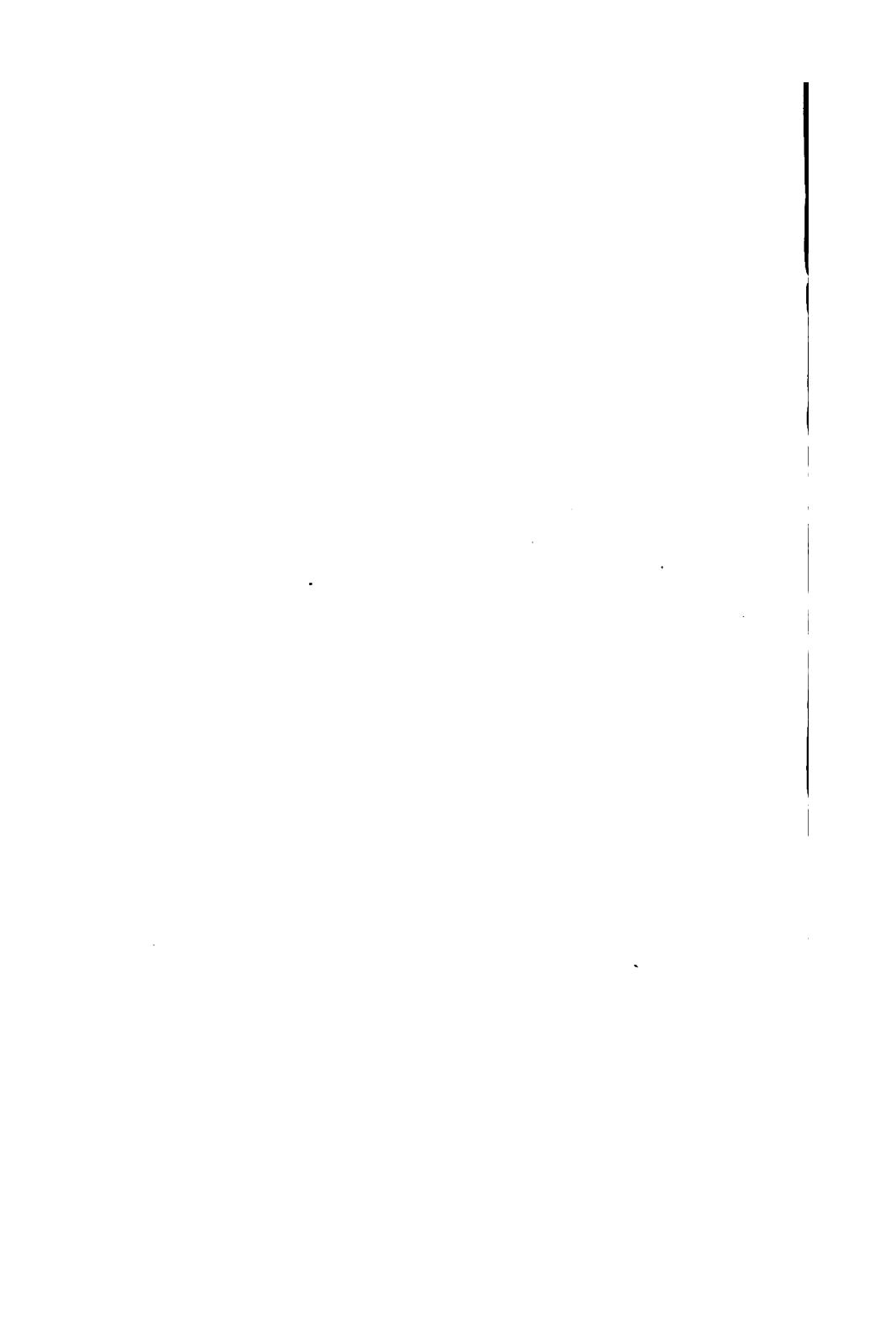
"You!" she said with a sob. "Oh, why do you persecute me so?" and dropping the lantern she fled into the interior of the cavern.

I followed, calling on her: "Miss Lovell! Miss Lovell!"

No sound issued. The place was in profound blackness, and seemed to be of vast size. I ran and groped my way, stumbling occasionally on unseen surfaces, and barking my shins on projecting points of rock. The cavern narrowed, so



"I ran forward. 'Miss Lovell!' I shouted"



that I was forced to walk, and then seemed to open out again. I struck a match, and found myself in a vault of considerable size with passages leading out of it. One or two of these I explored with the assistance of my matches, but at last my supply gave out, and I was obliged to feel my way back towards the outer air. I stopped to listen at intervals, but heard nothing. It was as if she had passed into the realms of the dead and silence; only the hollow murmur of the sea filled the empty cavern.

I emerged and sat outside sick at heart in the dispersing night. I cursed the iniquitous cunning of Alston which had poisoned her mind against me, and sapped her faith. But cursing was of no use. I had no option but to wait events. And then to me waiting came an understanding of the design, and a little better hope. Alston, finding he was pressed, and seeing it was impossible to get Miss Lovell away, had left her in the cave, and lured me away. That meant that he was to return, and his demeanour at the cottage had been merely "bluff." Doubtless he had hoped to obtain from me some information as to the whereabouts of my companions, for a guide to his actions. When he did come—I sat, buoyed up by a new confidence, making many plans.

I was roused from them by a louder roar of the sea, and a dash of spray which drenched me. I

got up, and in the grey light saw that the tide was swiftly advancing. Smitten by a sudden terror I went a little way along the dwindling slip of beach, and discovered that the water was right up against the cliffs. Only before the cave was there any space left. The crags overhead were sheer and formidable, but a little to one side they sloped inwards and a foothold was possible. There was no time to lose.

I rushed back into the cave and called, "Miss Lovell! Miss Lovell! The tide is coming in fast. There is danger. Miss Lovell!"

No answer came back to me. The boom of the water filled the cavern, and a flood of spume dispersed from a broken wave into the entrance. The tide was racing in. I plunged deeper into the darkness, calling, calling.

I entreated.

"Miss Lovell! Miss Lovell!"

Outside the sea bellowed; and still there was silence within. I ran into the interior cave, knocking my temple against the wall, and was just conscious of the warm blood that trickled down my face. The tide stormed the cavern like thunder.

"Sylvia! Sylvia!" I called. "For God's sake, Sylvia, my darling. Come to me, Sylvia!"

And then I was aware of a pitiful little cry, as it were a puppy that whimpered, and something

living and warm was against me. Something clung to me, weeping, and sobbing hysterically. Something cried against me, imploring me:

"Take me away! Save me! Oh take me away!"

I put my arms about her and half-dragged, half-carried her towards the mouth of the cavern, which was now alive with the sea. There was after each receding wave but a thin margin of wet sand on which we might stand; and the waves rolled in and buffeted us every moment. Access to the slope I had noticed was now cut off completely. We were doomed unless a miracle should happen.

Yet even in that anxious misery I could not be unhappy. Sylvia's light warm body clung to me.

"Save me!" she cried.

"My darling! my darling!" I cried back. "Why did you not trust me, me who would die for you?"

"Oh, it is cold," she whispered. "Save me!"

"Kiss me, dearest," I said, and my lips pressed hers, hers unresisting. She hung heavily on my arms; she had fainted.

The sea was gathering fresh strength every minute, and the assault on the land would be presently catastrophic. The dawn was come, but the light gave me no hope. The cliff rose like a wall, unscalable, and above the height a seagull

was crying. I sheltered my love as well as I could from the infuriate waves. Then, of a sudden, I heard my name, and craning my neck saw a figure on the cliff above.

"Keep a hold, Kerslake," said Alston's voice. "I've got a rope, and I'll let it down. Hear?"

"Yes," I shouted.

"I'll loop it with a hitch, and pull her up."

"Right," I shouted back, and waited with my back to the frenzied sea.

The foam was breaking over us now, and the tide had gathered about our knees, and poured through the mouth of the cavern with the noise of artillery; but presently, straining my eyes anxiously upwards, I perceived a small grey rope descending the face of the precipice, and my heart bounded in relief. The girl hung a dead weight on my arms.

When the rope reached me I secured her with some difficulty in the swing, tying her round the arms, and over the bosom for additional safety; and then I made a signal to Alston above, whilst all the time the sea leapt at me and lashed and blinded me. The rope with its precious burden went up slowly, too slowly for my impatient eyes; but at least it went surely. The man at the end of it was strong, of iron nerve, and of a determination I could not doubt. I would sooner have had him at that moment at the end of the rope than anyone

I knew. Sylvia Lovell, still unconscious, receded into safety, a dwindling bundle against the heights, swinging in her improvised cradle, now spinning round, now hesitating, and then again striking at an angle of rock, and being skillfully eased away and steered free of difficult places by the ingenious hand that controlled her destinies.

Controlled her destinies! Even as she faded upwards the spasm of fear which I had so often felt in connection with Alston recurred. He was once more in control of her fate, and all my contrivance and plotting and work had been for nothing. Under the flail of the sea I stood there, looking upwards, doubting, fearing, wondering, and for the time being all unconscious of my position. But to that I was recalled, and in the same moment I had the answer to my doubts. Sylvia Lovell's inanimate body disappeared over the cliff-top, and with it Alston also disappeared. His head was visible for a time as he put out his arm and dragged her into safety. But that was all. It did not reappear. He never came back.

Ten minutes later the waves were breaking about my waist, and hurling me against the rocks, and overhead in the full light of dawn there was no human being, nor any sound of life. Nothing reigned there save the savage elements, the screeching, howling, turbulent sea.

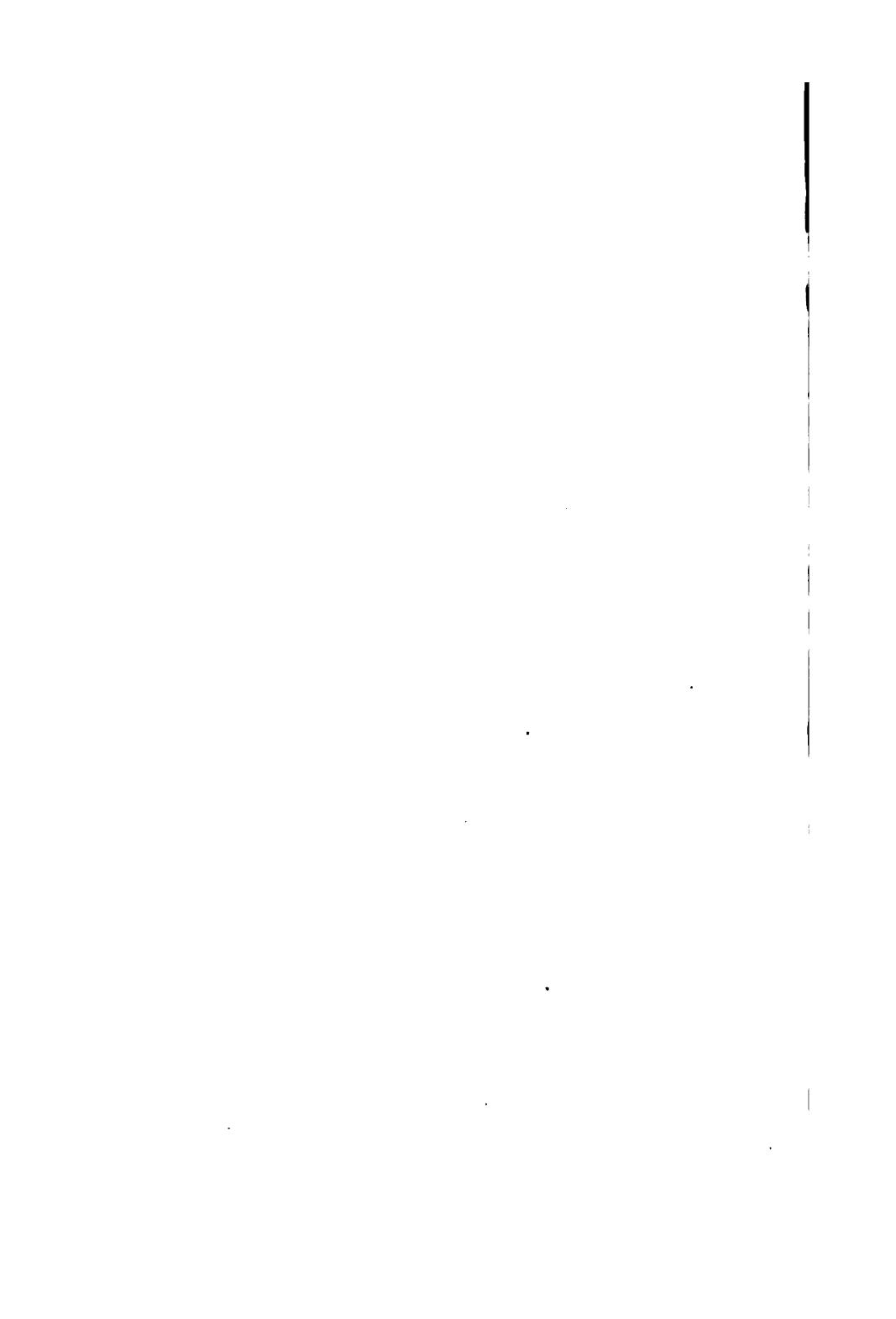
I shouted till my voice was hoarse. I called to

Alston by name. But no answer came to me and I knew the truth. I had been abandoned ruthlessly, as ruthlessly as he had sacrificed the happiness of Sylvia Lovell, as ruthlessly as he would sacrifice any human creature that stood between him and his end.

I became aware now of the outward drag of the sea. The water pressed upon me in rapidly succeeding waves, and after each blow the undertow sucked at me; as if some giant had endeavoured to strike me senseless and then bear off my unconscious body into the wastes and deeps of the ocean. But so far I had resisted the assault, though my chances of continuing to do so with the inroad of the tide were poor indeed. As the tide rose it would overwhelm me; it reached my heart now, and I staggered under it. Several times I went down in the mellay of surf and spume and rock. The time would come when I should not be able to recover my footing, and then I should be the helpless prey of the undertow. To me, buffeted about at the foot of the cliff, the incoming water, which was but little under the level of my eyes, seemed a surging, rolling, terrific green plain, ever restless, ever menacing. Its irresistibility was the most significant thing about it, its irresistibility and its continualness. It always was; it moved always; it threatened always. It was a thing alive, a crawling, roaring monster with a ravening



**"My eyes went hopelessly towards the cliff top"**



maw. Seen from the cliff above, as I had seen it lately, and seen from a ship, as I had seen it in all my life, there was something majestic in the march and mien of the ocean. To me, there, like a fettered slave awaiting the approach of the devouring monster, there was nothing high or dignified about it; it was merely sordidly tragic.

I clung to a point of rock and gazed out upon the charging field, with its irregular surface of falling water; and from that my eyes went hopelessly towards the cliff top. Was it a figure that moved there, or was it merely the hallucination of a tired mind, beaten into disorder by a struggle with the sea? I stared clinging, and, when the spray of a ferocious billow had dispersed from about my head, I saw the shape move. My voice poured its full volume to the sky, but was drowned in the clamour of the water. Here was the means of rescue at hand, and yet I should die without being heard, suffering the pangs of Tantalus. Was it Alston returned and repentant, I vaguely wondered in the tumult? Was it perchance a coast-guard on his early round? Yet whosoever it might be, it mattered not to me, an atom, clinging to a diminutive rock at the unseen base of wild cliffs buried under the tramplings of a wild sea.

The water beat about me, and strangely enough now I was not even cold, but rather of a pleasant warmth. Yet I knew my hands would presently

relax, and that I should slip off, and be at one with the sea, moving whither it went, without will or resistance. And in the thought I did not feel unhappy. I had reconciled myself to fate, and I had no room in my mind for other considerations save of the practicability of keeping my hold, and of the effort to do so. *That* alone seemed of importance; it occupied my mind to the exclusion of all else. I did not think of Alston or of Rudgwick, nor of my past life; and though, God knows, it was the only time in my waking life since I had known her that I did not do so, I did not then think of Sylvia Lovell.

In the midst of this I was aware somehow—I could not say why—that something was dangling near me, and I was aware too that I had put out one hand to take it. This must have been mere instinct, for I had no reasoning mind by that time; it had been dinned out of being by the deafening clamour and confusion. Yet I know that I had fingers on the rope, and then I know that I grasped it in two hands. There was a noose into which somehow, and for some reason which I could not have determined, I put my foot; and I remember vaguely clinging to the rope, and abandoning my rock.

I drifted away—away from the rock, away from the water, which leaped after me as if to tear me down and reclaim me. I noted the grey sands of

the cliff-face pass me very slowly, sands in which the grass grew, and in which large masses of rock were intercalated. It seemed a long time, but I did not mind; for the sensation of rising was pleasant, and away below me growled the immeasurable and moving sea.

At last I got to the top, and I heard a voice say in unmistakable accents:

“Guess, I was just in time.”

“Butterfield!” I said, and got to my feet, and dizzily stumbled.

He caught my arm. “Steady, boss,” he said. “You’re qualifying now for an infant in a go-cart. We’ll be safe, I reckon, at a little distance from the edge. I don’t like it much myself.”

We moved away, I leaning on his arm, for the violence of the sea had rendered me quite incapable of conducting myself like a reasonable being for the time. I was more or less stunned, I suppose, mentally and physically. But I soon came to, and over the inland hills my eyes saluted the rising sun. The dunes were in fresh light, and the glory of the morning was about me.

“How’d you get down there?” asked Butterfield presently.

“It’s more interesting to me,” I said freely, as I smiled, “to know how you got up here.”

“That’s easy enough,” he explained. “I had an inspiration. Seemed to me those runaways

ran away too fast, and I took a suspicion that they *didn't* run away. So I came back. And I was wandering about, getting my head clear, and learning the bearings, when I hit upon a rope hitched on a rock. Well, that looked funny, didn't it? And I said to myself, 'Where there's a rope there's a man'; and so I just looked over, and sure enough there was a man." He grinned. "Though I'm blamed if I know what you were doing fooling round there with the rope on the wrong side of the cliff."

"It wasn't my rope," I said.

"Not?" he asked in surprise.

"No," I said; and then I told him all.

Butterfield pursed his ugly face into a whistling condition, and emitted a long "Phew!"

"Say, this is getting pretty hot, ain't it?" he remarked. "This is getting down to bed rock right away. I thought we shouldn't find it all as easy as smiling when we brushed up against Alston for good and all." He leaned over the cliff, contemplating the welter below. "Can't say I like the look of it. Land's good enough for me. Anyway, you're square now. The boss'll take it pretty badly, Alston getting away with the last trick. Say, how long ago?"

I had no very definite opinion on this point, but made a guess at the time for twenty minutes.

He puckered his brow, and stared disconsolately

over the dunes. "Might as well look for a needle in a stack," he observed.

With each minute I was becoming myself, and increasingly able to take stock of the situation.

"It's clear," I said, "that Alston was bluffing, when he talked of going to London. He was waiting his chance to get back to the cave, and he almost arrived too late. He knew he was running it close; hence the rope. And you may depend upon it in the meantime he had made his plans. His object is to get married, after which he can defy us all."

"The boss'll be mad," repeated poor Butterfield.

"You must remember he is encumbered with a fainting girl," I said. "Also," I added grimly; "he's not aware that we two are discussing him here. I'm dead to him."

"Blame me if it isn't getting mighty hot," said the factotum again. "Rare hot, and it'll be hotter before we've finished, if the boss knows how."

"We've got to follow the trail," I said, moving away, and then, on a sudden thought, paused. "Butterfield, you're a man of your wits and hands, and by this you've wiped out a precious lot. I thank you."

"Oh, that's all right," said he. "We're working in together. Besides," he added. "You're a white man."

## CHAPTER XIX

### IN THE PINE-WOOD

"WHERE's Rudgwick?" I asked presently.

Butterfield looked up from the ground he had been examining for tracks of feet, and his nose crinkled up in a way he had.

"The boss's at Padstow by this, I reckon. He made tracks there soon as ever he saw how."

"What! Given it up?" I ejaculated in astonishment.

"Not much," said the faithful jackal. "He's laying low for a purpose, I shouldn't be surprised. So soon as he saw you on the bender he hailed me. 'That you, Nathaniel?' says he. 'Well, I reckon I'm going home to a comfortable bed. See here, Butterfield!' he says. 'That lieutenant's smart enough. I guess he's a better hound than I am. I'm going to leave him on the scent.'"

"I am complimented," said I, "but he is too sanguine. You see what a mess I made of it."

Butterfield considered it critically. "No; not much of a mess anyway," he pronounced. "You ran the fox to the earth, and that's business."

"It was, I suspect, as much the fox's doing as mine."

"Well, you found the girl, and that counts," he declared.

"And you saved me, and that counts," I added.  
"And now we've got to pick up the scent again.  
See; rain fell yesterday and laid the sand; we  
ought to find footmarks."

We reached the margin where the sandy tract began and cast about us in all directions. An exclamation from Butterfield brought me to him and his discovery. There were the unmistakable marks of a man's boots, large, clean and deep-sunk, as if he carried a burden. They pointed away from the cliff.

"Here we are then," I said briskly. "Let us follow. If I've not a nose I've eyes; and yours are worth a fortune."

Butterfield who paid no attention to this, was scrutinising me. "Say, you feeling all right?" he asked kindly.

"As fit as a fiddle," I replied promptly. "I'm going into action."

"That's all right," he nodded, "Thought that drenching—"

"Sea water will never harm a sea-dog," I said.

"Well, I've no fancy for it myself," said he.  
"Personally I don't hanker after a wetting. It would get on my chest, and I couldn't stand it."

I'd run a fair chance of pegging out," and he buttoned his coat in the cool air closer about his meagre person.

"Come on," said I impatiently.

We trailed Alston across the dunes for half a mile, and then we lost the scent, owing to the convergence of other footmarks. It was only after traversing the ground covered by one of these that we disentangled the right from the wrong. Here, we conjectured, from the prints, Miss Lovell had begun to walk independently.

Hitherto her foot-marks had been irregular and in proximity to Alston's indicating that she had not fully recovered and probably had leaned on him. But henceforth they moved in detachment, as if with a will of their own.

We followed hotly now, and it was not long before the dunes ceased, and we emerged on a level road, bordered on the farther side by a stone fence and fields.

"I guess we lose it here," said Butterfield.

I pointed to a building some distance away, and we advanced towards it. When we got nearer I perceived that it was a wayside inn, with white-washed walls, and there was a little stir about it for all that the hour was so early. This was accounted for by the presence of a motor-car in the road without, the beat of whose engine we could hear as we came up.

I entered the small bar-room, and ordered a glass of ale, of which indeed I was glad. Then I put my queries. Had a tall man with a big moustache been seen there in company with a young lady wet from the sea?

The woman looked at me with evident interest. Yes; an hour ago or less. The lady had had an accident, had been caught by the tide; and the gentleman had rescued her.

"Exactly what did happen," I said gravely. "We were very anxious, and now we are relieved. Which way did they go? Was it to Padstow?"

Unfortunately the landlady did not know. They had driven southwards. That was the limit of her knowledge.

"Driven!" I echoed.

Yes; the gentleman had arrived with a carriage, and had gone down to the bay. Then he had rescued the lady from her plight, and then they had driven away.

It was very simple, particularly to this good soul who never asked questions of Fate. I looked at Butterfield, who made a grimace that was designed for a communication. We hastily treated.

"Alston to a 't,'" said Mr. Butterfield. "I guess he's gone to Padstow."

"Padstow!" I said. "Why on earth should he go to Padstow?"

"Well," said the factotum deliberately. "It would be a great satisfaction to Alston to crowd out the boss in his own theatre. You see, he reckon's the boss's beat, and it looks very like it. It would be a blamed good notion to marry under the boss's nose."

"But that would be taking too great a risk," I said incredulously.

"If I were playing up against the boss," said Butterfield obstinately, "I would ask myself, what'd make him smart most in defeat, and I reckon I'd fix it up to do it under his nose. I bet Alston's gone Padstow way."

"I don't agree with you," I said. "The man would be a fool to take the risk. I don't interpret Alston that way."

"Well, that's my notion," said the little man mulishly.

I began to see his limitations, and I lost patience.

"Well, I'm going to try the railway," I said. "He can get a train from Wadebridge without danger, and marry in leisured haste. Besides, at the stations he would leave his mark."

Butterfield was quite agreeable to parting with me, having this fixed idea regarding Padstow. I believe he thought that the devil, having defeated his master, would exult in impish tricks. Anyway he left me, hurrying for Padstow, and with the in-

tention of getting a trap of some kind at the neighbouring farm.

But a trap was of no use to me, who was nearly an hour behind my enemy, if I was to forestall him at the railway station. Alston did nothing for show; he took the lines of least resistance; of that I was sure. He would then go to the nearest railway station which was Wadebridge, and take train to the nearest safe town. My travelled eye fell on the lounging figure of the chauffeur in his leather suit. The beat of the engine was in my head. The man was looking at us with uninterested curiosity, thin of face, ratlike, with keen and tricky eyes. He lolled luxuriously glass in hand.

"Roads good?" I ejaculated.

"Pretty fair, Sir. I had a puncture a dozen miles back."

"What is she?"

"Mercedes—she's getting old now, but she's had a splendid life."

"A little complicated in machinery?" I suggested.

He admitted it, adding that one cylinder had broken down last evening, and he had had to put up on the road.

"My gentleman went on by train; and I'm on the way to join him," he added.

Here was some news. "Early starting," I remarked.

"I'm in no hurry," he replied with a smile at his glass.

"That's all right," said I. "Have another, and then come out and have a chat."

He acceded willingly enough. I thought I knew greedy eyes when I saw them, and here they were coupled with good nature.

"It's a matter of vital importance for me to get to Wadebridge at once," I explained outside in the road. "I'm already late. Three guineas if I have a lift on your car."

He hardly hesitated. "Right, Sir," he said, and jumped into the car. His every action was businesslike; he was chauffeur now, not a way-side conversationalist, and I was his master. The engine had been running free; now he put on the clutches and the car moved out. In ten minutes she was making at a rate between twenty and thirty miles an hour.

I sat in the tonneau enjoying the stream of good morning air as we flew down the miles, and at the same time I had much to pre-occupy me. If I were wrong in my guess about Alston I had lost him for good and all. Everything hung on this chance, and I admitted to myself that it was but a chance. Still, in the conduct of life it is only possible for us to make the best theory and act upon it. I had plumbed Alston's mind, and I thought he would take the shortest course out of

his difficulties. If he did that he would go to Wadebridge. But if he did not he had won and I had lost. That was the issue.

We left the seaboard and turned inland at the same pace, and we were not five minutes in our new course when my hopes flowered triumphantly; for the Mercedes swept up towards a farmer's cart, which was jogging comfortably along the road, as if it had been to market and the occupants were a man—and a girl.

I recognized Alston even before I knew it was Sylvia Lovell, and I lay back in the tonneau humped against the side of the car, until my head was below the level. There flashed past an automobile with a reckless chauffeur and emptiness behind him; such was the impression that must have been made upon Alston in the second or two of time in which we hung in the way. I did not rise until we were well in the distance, and when I did so I allowed the car to run a mile farther. Then I stopped the man.

"I won't go any farther," I said. "You've earned your money." I paid him. "Goodbye."

He must have considered me insane, as I leapt swiftly out of the car and ran along the road. Farm gates opened nearby, but I did not enter these. I kept on my course, and looking back saw the car wheeling about, and then saw it starting, and then again it was a vanishing flash in the

prospect. I came to a pause at that, and went back. Alston would be there within ten minutes, and I had time to prepare. What would he do? Would he hesitate to doom to death this apparition from the dead whom he had already doomed? I opened the revolver with which I had supplied myself in London, and loaded it carefully. The sea-water had not penetrated into my little tin boxes. I replaced the weapon in my coat, and waited. I had been drenched an hour back; I was now dry; nay more, I was hot and burning.

I passed the farm gates and walked into the solitude of the winding road. On one side stretched a stone fence, and beyond it the fields, bare of trees but summer-ripe with green, an undulating country somewhat monotonous to the eye. Seaward the land was more broken, and at a little distance was an open pine-wood. Between the barren narrows of the road came Alston's farmer's cart jogging as for market.

I stopped him by blocking his path, and he first shouted in anger, and then was silent, staring. If I could credit my eyes, there was a little pallor in his face and his nostrils worked.

"You're right down smart, Lieutenant," he said at last. "I suppose you want a chat with me."

"That's exactly it," I said, and I looked at his companion. Her gaze was upon me, eager, fright-

ened, and bewildered all in one. She was as pale as a lily, and her hands were clutched upon the side of the cart. She no longer wore her Breton dress, as I had noted amid the alarms of that terrible dawn, but I did not learn till long afterwards how she had been furnished with new garments of her place and age. Nor did I think of so trivial a matter at that moment. She only created upon me an impression of white and terrified beauty against the green setting of the morning.

Alston put the reins slowly into her hands, and began to descend. Then he paused, as if something had occurred to him. He was taking it very wonderfully. Here was the man he had believed dead and done for come, so to speak, as an apparition in judgment against him. He must have thought he had lost on the very last cast of the die, and as he made that motion to climb down I doubt not his heart was bitter indeed. There was murder in his even pale face, as his looks met mine, or I am no judge of man and manner. But that was only for an instant. Violence was impracticable there. He knew that, and I think he framed his plans that instant as he paused. How much Sylvia Lovell knew of his baseness in leaving me to die I could not say. She had been unconscious when I made her fast to the rope, and she had arrived at the top of the cliff still unconscious. It was certain that she had not been aware of his

actual desertion of me, and his glib tongue might explain away much. It was surprise that I read in her expression; amazement and other emotions which I did not analyse then, which I might not have dared to analyse. Assuredly there was no horror in it, as one might anticipate for a resurrection.

Alston descended after his pause.

"We'll get along to the farm yonder," he said. "Sylvia girl, take a hold of the reins. It's a prime day, Kerslake."

"An excellent morning to be alive," I said slowly.

"That's so. I'm in no hurry to die, and I guess you're the same," he remarked, as we proceeded slowly along the road, Alston leading the horse.

There was between us the awkwardness of the girl's presence. She was white and silent, wondering, maybe fearing; for she could not understand. She had left us working as apparent friends; she found us open enemies. In all that had puzzled and harassed her throughout that period of persecution, this fact must have been the supreme bewilderment. She glanced pitifully at me, and then away; she spoke no word; her underlip, sucked in, quivered in an unheard sob. My heart bled for her, and I could have taken her in my arms and comforted her. I had held her to my breast in the dripping sea; I longed to repeat that tender

encouragement on land. But I had to dispose of Alston, and Alston, I knew well enough, spelt black danger. All my nerves and wits must be in train for that coming encounter.

"We'll ask the farm people to put you up, Sylvia," he said, "while Mr. Kerslake and I have our business talk," and he took the cart through the gates.

A man lifted a head inquiringly over the byre walls and stared. Alston approached him.

"Can we leave this young lady here for ten minutes, while we have a look around?" he asked in his pleasant way. "She's not interested any in what we're after; so if you don't mind the cart putting up in your yard for a little, I should take it as a favour."

There was no objection offered by the farmer who civilly informed us we were welcome, and Alston turned after a nod of thanks.

"Now Sylvia, just you amuse yourself a while, and I'll be back presently. Come along, Kerslake."

I took off my hat in formal greeting to the girl, and walked away with him. In the circumstances it was an odd parting, as odd as the friendly way in which he and I went out of the gates together. There was nothing dramatic in our exit; it was just commonplace and even rather awkward.

Once on the road I spoke, sharply enough.

"You know what's got to come. We've got to settle."

"Yes," he drawled. "I guess we've got to settle, Lieutenant. We'll fix that up so soon as we get some privacy of our own."

The solitude was privacy enough for me, but not for Alston, the hard glitter of whose eyes was frosty on me. But he was suave as ever, as we walked we might have been two friends on a morning walk admiring the country. He wheeled off the road upon a piece of common which harboured the dark pine-wood, penetrated this some distance and presently came to a pause, and faced me.

"You've got some remarks to make I take it," he began. "I'd like to begin with a question, if I've got priority; and that's how you got out of that fix down there by the cliffs?"

"An old acquaintance of yours," I replied quickly. "Butterfield."

"Say!" he commented. "Well, that was providential. I'd like to know a thing or two more for my private edification, but I guess there isn't time, so we'll let it slide."

"I too," I said, "should like to express my opinion pretty strongly about you and your ways, but as you say there isn't time, and so—"

"Oh, quit, quit," he interrupted impatiently.

"Very well," I said. "The explanation is

merely this. I know your story, and I'm going to communicate it to Miss Lovell." He mused, considering me.

"Do you think she'll credit it or you?" he asked.

"There's plenty of documentary evidence," I put in.

"Wilson's seen to that, eh? Well, you got it?" he asked.

"No; but my word's sufficient. I have seen it."

"You're almighty sure of your powers of persuasion and attraction. You fancy yourself, Lieutenant."

"A man," said I, "expects to be believed in this country when he pledges his word."

"This is an almighty number one country," said Alston with sarcasm. "It contains a heap of smart men, some of whom are in His Majesty's Navy, I shouldn't wonder. So you're going to Miss Lovell with a cock-and-bull tale about me and some millions."

"It's my intention to do so at once," I answered.

"And you look to receive the reward of virtue," he said smiling, but I did not like the smile.

"You are aware that virtue is the only reward," I retorted in his own voice.

"You'll come along with repartee presently," he said. "But I guess we don't want to spend the day in these sallies. We've got to settle, and

there's only one way to settle. If you were to go to Miss Lovell with your information it wouldn't serve you much. Suppose you try."

He nodded as if dismissing me, and walked a yard or two away through the pines. I too moved, but in another direction to regain the open ground, and the road. A report caught my ear, and, swiftly turning, I saw Alston with a revolver in his hand. He was as cool and undisturbed as if he were playing billiards. A bullet had broken a twig in the fir between us. I slid behind the red bole of the tree, and put my hand in my breast pocket to secure my own weapon. He had determined to silence me. It was a decision worthy of him, and I might have expected something remarkable, but I had not anticipated exactly that. It was a duel between us; for I knew he would have no mercy. He had taken me there, had compassed that "privacy" for that very purpose. We were out of earshot of the farm, and the road was empty. Whatever might befall within the forest of firs would not be known—at least not then, nor for some time afterwards.

Alston's second shot singed the bark on the tree behind which I had taken refuge. He himself had got behind a fir and it was merely the glint of his barrel I caught. I respected his marksmanship to such a degree that I would not risk breaking cover; and yet I could not remain there forever.

I must take the hazard, and get out of range. I dashed from my shelter for another fir, and instantly I heard the crack of his revolver. The whizz and whirr of the bullet was in my ears as it went past. It had been a very "close shave," and I did not like the idea of repeating it. His hand was just visible twenty yards away, and I thrust my own weapon round the bole and fired, hoping to disable his fingers. But I saw the bullet knock a splinter from the tree. I was hampered, as was he, by inability to get the eye on its proper plane. To do that would have been too desperate a venture. We must aim more or less by guess-work. That, I suppose, accounted for his failure for so long. As I found that he was thus embarrassed by his posture I took more liberties, and I moved from tree to tree without mishap. Once or twice his shot came uncomfortably near me, but I escaped without a hit. Seeing the success of my manœuvres, and fearing lest he should lose me, Alston now adopted my tactics. He advanced as I retreated by the same methods, and it was thus that, in growing anger and recklessness, I had my better chance at him.

The scene was more suitable for a Western state than for civilized and humane England. The morning was still young, and the sun shone bright and high, throwing a chequer of shade and light on the ground where it penetrated. The

firs grew thickly but with absolutely no under-growth between the stems, nor did any grass clothe the earth, which was invested with a thick mantle of withered pine-needles that were as silent to the tread as the pile of a rich carpet. Under the spreading canopy of the pines was a long, broad, shadowed stillness, stem rising after stem, in picturesque redness, until they vanished over a rise at the back.

It was this stillness that our pistols broke, as in this strange duel that had been forced upon me we moved and counter-moved and fired and re-loaded and fired again.

It was my aim all along to disable his shooting arm, but I will confess that after some time I was not particular as to where I should hit the ruffian. He had shown himself as callous as I could have deemed any human being to be. He had left me to an ugly death, had welcomed me on my escape with a cool jest, and was now bent on my extinction in another way. I was a menace to him, and he would be rid of me by any means. That was how things stood between us.

It struck me suddenly in the course of this remarkable exhibition that there was no practical term to it except in the exhaustion of our cartridges. To seek the open was to court disaster, and if I were to escape the assassin, I was condemned to move around the mazes of the pine-

wood until Alston was pleased or forced to abandon his attempt. The thought was not cheering, but the instant business of life was to avoid his shots and wing him if I could. We were rarely more than twenty paces apart, but very often the boles of intervening firs rendered the aim difficult. It was a ricochet that at last got him, the bullet turning off a tree nearby, and lodging as I conjectured in his shoulder. He uttered a curse, stepped out deliberately from cover and gave his answer.

That reckless act, carefully calculated, I made no doubt, as was his recklessness ever, brought me into the line of his fire. My revolver spoke too late; I felt a thud and a prodding pain in my leg, and went down unsteadily on my knees.

Alston stood a moment gazing at me, and then raised his weapon again as if he would make sure, hesitated, and put it back, seeing me weakly throw my arm forward in a wild aim. He turned and without a word glided swiftly through the trees. As I have said, he was not the man to take unnecessary risks. He was not thirsty of blood. If I had perished off the coast he would have been easily rid of me, and would not have given me a second thought. Here, it was enough for his purpose that he should disable me. Dead men tell tales, but a limping cripple in a silent wood would tell none. I limped, tried to get on my feet, and rolled over with the pain.

## CHAPTER XX

### THE QUARRY DOUBLES

The bullet had struck the ankle, and bruised it, which was why I suffered so acutely at the time. That it had been devilishly designed for me in that precise place I could not doubt, knowing Alston's powers, and he had calculated to a nicety; it was five minutes before I recovered sufficiently to make another attempt to walk, and then at the cost of much pain. I only succeeded in "hirpling" along a few yards at a time. It was ten minutes before I reached the border of the wood, and that was some distance from the farm. By the time I got so far Alston would have vanished, and I should have been checkmated once and for all.

I managed at last to hobble to the farm, hitting upon a gait which reduced the discomfort to a minimum; and of course found the cart gone. The civil farmer was not visible, but a knock on the door brought out his wife, who gave me the information I wanted. Alston had been gone fifteen minutes or more. That was what I had anticipated; but what she added I had not looked

for and it at once amazed me and filled me with new hope. The gentleman had had a horse harnessed and gone after the lady!

There was the surprise, and I digested it with exultation. It appeared that almost directly our backs were turned Miss Lovell announced her intention of going on, and, none being of an authority to stay her, she had driven off, "looking" (said my informant) "as if she was afraid she'd lose a train." I could understand it now. She had been tossed about from battledore to battledore on the intrigues of these men, and, seeing her chance for escape, had taken it and fled. Whither could she flee? Well, she knew no harm of Alston save that he had involuntarily brought her this untoward persecution, but she was weary and heartsore and would rest. She had probably designed to go home to her mother. In that case she would go to a railway station. But had she the means to get back to the Island? If not, would she go —?

But these speculations, which buzzed in my head, were futile then. The farmer's wife did not know her destination, but of Alstons', angry and masterful as he had displayed himself on learning of the flight, she had a notion.

"He drove off fast on the Wadebridge road, fast as he could with the pony."

Wadebridge, of course, being the railway ter-

minus, would probably be the objective, and Wadebridge, then, was my destination also; for so long as I had one of them under my eyes so long was their separation practicable. I could not hobble into Wadebridge, but if there was another pony I might follow Alston's example. I explained that I had hurt my ankle, and was reassured about the horse. The woman must have set us all down as mad, engaged as we were suddenly now in this chase "in canon." But I was thinking nothing of appearances. I only wanted a vehicle, and at last I got it.

A farm-hand drove me with what speed we might get up into Wadebridge, where I at once made researches at the station. And there I got on the trail of one of the fugitives, for a man answering to Alston's description had recently been making inquiries like myself, and had gone off in extreme haste. Evidently then Miss Lovell had not taken the train at Wadebridge, and I began to fear she was not equipped for the journey. She had long since exhausted what little money she had with her, as I knew; it was not likely that she had come into the possession of more. I hated to think of her receiving money from Alston, and for some reason in my mind I was sure she had not. Destitute of means then to travel, whither would she take refuge? I learned from a porter that the man he had described had turned his trap

abruptly and driven off, through the town. That could only mean that he was bound for Padstow. Well, if Padstow suited Alston it would suit me. So long as he was not with Miss Lovell I cared not.

We scrambled into Padstow with our rustic chaise, and almost the first person I met in the little town was Butterfield. In my anxiety to hear what his news was I got out of the cart heedlessly and, my wounded leg giving away, came down in a heap.

"What's the matter?" he inquired, helping me up.

He was darkly melancholy, as was his habit in a reverse. I told him I had a bad ankle, for I wanted no explanations just then, and I was rushing on an eager question when he said gloomily:

"Well, I guess, it don't matter now, not a corn cob. I guess we're left."

"Why?" I asked.

"They're married and fixed up," he said in his dejected voice. "They've gone off honeymooning on the yacht."

"What?" I demanded in bewilderment, thinking he had taken leave of his senses.

"Say, I was smart enough to guess Alston'd come to Padstow. So he did. He thought he'd give the boss a treat, and he's done it. Stole the girl from under our noses. I guess I feel pretty mean about it."

"You're talking abject nonsense, man," I said angrily. "They're not married. On the contrary, Miss Lovell has run away from Alston. I've followed them all over the country."

He stared at me. "One of us is a blamed liar or a fool," he remarked. "I saw Alston and Miss Lovell standing out in a fishing boat in the harbor not half an hour ago, and I guess he meant us to see him, too. I wonder he didn't wave a flag or a handkerchief at us by way of playful greeting. Oh, he's gone off with her safe enough."

I slapped his shoulder. "You're right there, but you're wrong in your assumption," I said. "I see it now. I've been mixed up in it, and there's a bullet in my ankle to tell the tale. Miss Lovell bolted from Alston while we were having a considerable scrap. And he went after her, missed her at Wadebridge, but evidently overtook her here, and persuaded her to join him again. The man's equal to anything, by the Lord, he is. Damn him for a smooth-faced rogue!"

"That so?" said Butterfield in astonishment; and his face lightened. "Come right along then, let's tell the boss. He's been right down sick about it, being euchred in that way. This'll cheer him up some."

I dismissed my trap, and we found Rudgwick in his inn glowering on the water.

"Well, Lieutenant," he said sarcastically when

I entered. "I congratulate you on your entrance. You came on the boards in time for the curtain—the back of it."

"Boss, they're not hitched up," burst forth Butterfield.

"That so?" said Rudgwick, looking from one to the other of us. "Well, if you say it, you've got some reason for saying it, I suppose."

I told him, and as he listened his face relaxed in a grim smile.

"Sorry for your foot, Kerslake," he said at last. "But you've done good service this trip. I knew I was right in leaving you plenty of rope. There's the value of coincidence. There's no such thing as real coincidence; take it from me. When you're dealing in human factors you arrange the coincidences yourself. I guess you made those coincidences. Anyway we're going to fix up something for Fordyce to amuse him, this time. Look here; there's no possibility of any marriage having come off?"

"Absolutely impossible," I said, "and if you doubt you have only to make inquiry at the churches."

"Why, I'd just forgotten all about that," he said cheerfully. "I'd got a notion that any house would do, same as in the United States, where we can fix these things up without any trouble. But I remember now. Well, that fool business is

going to be good for us. Nathaniel, take a look round at the churches with a roll of notes, and come back in half an hour. I'll wait for you." The factotum went obediently. "And now we're going to talk business, Kerslake," he continued briskly. "Man, I was mad when I saw that boat slipping out, and thought all was up. I reckoned I ought to make Fordyce a present of the schooner as a wedding offering and go back to America. I was mighty sick, and I wouldn't have shown up for a million dollars. But now we'll freeze him out. Pity that leg of yours is game. Guess we'll come to something pretty warm this time. Oh, we're not done yet. This is the last act, and it ought to be a lively one. Say, ring that bell, and we'll have a whiskey and soda on this. We're going to start right away. The chase will be hotter than ever."

He drank his whiskey, drew his face into a mask, and sat silent. Then he looked up.

"Can you get a boat of any size here? One of those big smacks that can sail anyway?"

"Yes, I have no doubt I can hire a lugger or a ketch or something of the sort."

"Well, get along then, Lieutenant, and have her ready"—he pulled out his watch—"by two o'clock. Oh, there's your leg."

"That can go hang," said I, limping to the door, "if we're going into action."

"Take it from me, my son, we are," he said solemnly.

I was able to secure a lugger in the estuary which I hoped would serve our purpose, though naturally she could not be ready as early as Rudgwick wanted. She was a big clumsy thing, but she looked as if she would have pace with a good wind such as was now kindling foamheads over the sea. And that done I put my ankle in a doctor's hands, with some tale of an accident which he never questioned. The injury was immaterial and he promised me I should be quite recovered in a week; but it sufficed still to keep me in a certain amount of pain and to impede my movements. However I hobbled through the necessary work, and returned to Rudgwick, who had already received Butterfield's report.

"This has been your show so far, Kerslake," he said to me, "and I'm going to give you a free hand. I'll back you for all I'm worth, and that's not nix. You've only got to go ahead."

"Very well," I said. "You shall have a run for your money, and we start at three."

We started to the minute, running out with a good breeze behind us, and a capable crew of several hands. The probable destination of Alston had been exercising my mind, and I had formed conclusions of my own, which I put before Rudgwick.

"He ran the blockade, and it didn't come off, and he's put out again. The question is, where's he for? It seems to me that there's been a hitch with Miss Lovell." Ah, it delighted me to think that, and to say that, but surely I was justified after what I had seen, and after her flight. "My theory is that Alston overtook Miss Lovell in Padstow, but that she refused to marry him. She had reason. A girl might very justly shrink from so grave a step in the midst of these unintelligible events. She has been buffeted about, and knows no more why than a child in arms. It has been a gross shame, an indelible infamy."

I spoke hotly, moved by my indignation. Rudgwick listened equably.

"Get along," he said.

"She would decline to be hurried into bonds, and as it is evident he could not constrain her, he has done the next best thing from his point of view. He has carried her off to renew the attempt. He wants to give her breathing-time, to let her recover, and then he will repeat his feat."

"Or try to," interjected Rudgwick dryly. "You've got to stop him. That's your business."

He spoke as if I were a clerk or agent engaged by him, but I had come to know his ways, and I did not mind. He knew on what footing we

were, and I was content to work with him for the time being.

"Alston," I continued, "may even have persuaded her that he would go round to the Isle of Wight, and restore her to her mother. I think she's wanted that badly. Anyway he's got hold of her, and is on the whole in no worse a position than he was before his attempt. Indeed he probably thinks he is in a better, as he may not have known of your presence here; and me he considers *hors de combat*."

"That's good logic," approved Rudgwick. "But it don't get us to where he is, or what he's going for."

"The ground's cleared a bit by these conclusions at any rate," I said, "and I think we can go a little farther with safety. The schooner's somewhere nearby for he's off to it in a small smack. He expects to strike her soon, probably this evening. Alston isn't a sailor, and he doesn't like the water, but he's got to get to the *Mermaid*. That means she might be up or down the coast anywhere; but that isn't likely in the circumstances. She put off, and is waiting. That looks to me like Lundy Island."

"You think she's fixed up at Lundy Island?" he inquired.

"Yes; that's the size of it. Anyway I'm going to make the island for a try."

He nodded, and said nothing. He was a mere passenger on the lugger now, and sat abaft smoking his cigars and eyeing the operations, without comment, his yachting cap tilted back on his head, and his broad clean-shaven face set between grimness and coolness.

We made good way, and got in the neighbourhood of Lundy towards dusk. The fishing smack had had several hours start of us, and consequently should already have arrived at her destination, if the island was her destination. Of that we were by no means certain. Yet I had additional reasons for supposing it to be. Had the *Mermaid* been lying off the coast either of North Cornwall or Devon, Alston would not have taken to the sea, which he disliked, at Padstow, but would have driven northwards or southwards to an easier point of departure. And after all, Lundy was a likely place of rendezvous. So I headed for Lundy in the hope of finding my calculations accurate. The first thing that gave me confidence was the sight of a single fishing-smack in the gloaming, tacking for the mainland. Neither Butterfield nor Rudgwick could say if this were the boat in which Alston had sailed, having no instinct of the sea, but I was convinced in my heart that it was so. The fugitives had been transhipped, and the smack was returning to Padstow.

We sighted the island in the growing darkness, but I fetched up towards the north, leaving it on my port. A few lights rode in the offing, and betrayed the presence of shipping, but there was no sign of the schooner.

"You're in the ditch now," remarked Rudgwick, when this was apparent.

"No," said I, "not yet, and don't mean to be. What's Alston going to do, when he meets the *Mermaid*? He can't set his sails for America; I doubt if he can even venture on Ireland, if what you say about the provisioning holds. He's got to get to land somewhere on this coast, and Lundy's a good jumping-off place. If he thinks he's given you the slip (and he very well may) he won't take great pains to hide his movements. Why should he? He can make a dash for it, and bring off what he wants almost anywhere. That's how he will look at it. He'll pick up the schooner, and go—well, north maybe, certainly not back to Padstow."

"That sounds sense," observed Rudgwick. "But that doesn't bring us on to him."

"A sailor would see it as plain as a mast," I said sarcastically. "But you only own sailors."

"No, by God, I don't," he said good-humouredly enough. "They own my vessel."

I justified myself to him before long by picking up the trail, mainly by accident. I was fully

confident that I could bring up at the same port as the schooner sooner or later, but chance favoured me, and it was sooner. The rake of her masts was unmistakable in the luminous night, and I guessed that she was making for the land as fast as her heels would carry her. Of course we were safe from detection, as our lugger was unknown, and Alston would be all unconscious that he was still followed. Yet it would not do to take risks, and so I kept the boat on a parallel course at a good distance; and we both raced for harbour, but for what harbour I knew not.

A moon broke out a little later, and I was able presently to conjecture whither we were bound.

The schooner, trim and graceful with her dandy airs, was cantering under a brisk wind, all frills on, and our lubberly lugger ploughed after her, like a cart-horse, but a cart-horse with speed. There was no question by this time that Alston designed to enter the Severn estuary and utilise one of the innumerable refuges on the shores, from Cardiff, it might be, to Bristol. The range was ample. I told Rudgwick so, and he pondered.

"Can we hold him?" he asked.

"In this wind, yes," I said. "But not in beating up."

"Well, this wind's got to go on," was all he

remarked, as if he had authority over the elements, and could operate them as he operated a stock.

Yet the wind did hold, at least, for a time, as you shall hear; and, parted by scarcely a mile of heaving water, schooner and lugger, quarry and hound, swung into the open estuary.

## CHAPTER XXI

### ALSTON AT BAY

THE wind held till dawn and then died away, leaving us to struggle along in an unequal encounter. Rudgwick, understanding none of the details of seamanship, looked on indifferently, and it was I who fumed at heart. I know that if he had recognised how things were going he would have shown his ugly side; but he had faith in me, and that and ignorance kept him cheerful. I never did see Rudgwick really "nasty," but one was always conscious that he could be, and I have no doubt he had often been. While engaged in his fight, and while that fight hung in the balance he kept an equable temper; but I did not know how he would lose. He would certainly be restrained in defeat neither by justice nor generosity.

But luckily he had not to discover the weakness of the lugger in that light wind; for before my astounded eyes the schooner made a board unexpectedly, and began to draw in to shore. We were off the rocky cliffs by Minehead, and it was apparent from the new move that Alston

desired to land there. So much the better for us; our unsuspected lugger could safely harbour there also. Rudgwick, who had retired for sleep, was awake by the time we anchored, and was greatly astonished.

"Got 'em cornered right away, Kerslake," he said, and then, staring at the schooner blackly, added, "Now, we'll talk."

I shall certainly never forget the scene which ensued between the two men and to which I come at once.

At six Rudgwick announced his intention of boarding the yacht and of giving Alston a surprise. The schooner lay anchored off the shore, like the lugger, and at half a mile's distance; and the sun shone on the smooth water between us. Rudgwick, Butterfield and myself were pulled across by two of our hands, and as we came up, the figure of a man was stooped over the taffrail. The glare from the sea was in my eyes, so that I could not recognise him, but I was aware that he had suddenly stood up and walked hurriedly away. Then we ran alongside, and scrambled on deck.

Alston himself met us, and, if it were not too preposterous a phrase in the circumstances, I should say welcomed us. Someone had hastily warned him of the approach, and he was able to pull himself together, and take it this way. The man was amazing.

"I take it very friendly of you, Wilson," he remarked with his even smile, "coming aboard like this. Guess it reminds me of a surprise party away home. Lieutenant, I don't forget to ask after your leg."

"That's all right," said Rudgwick grimly. "We'll push business through before we come to compliments, if you don't mind, Fordyce. There's a hell of a lot between us. Can't you manage a little privacy on this yacht of yours?"

Alston hesitated for a moment, and then led the way towards the deck-cabins which I remembered so well. There was no other person visible anywhere, save a man cleaning a lamp forward. Rudgwick took a seat in the cabin that had been his office, and grinned.

"Jude all right?" he asked, setting aside his yachting cap.

"He don't enjoy bad health much," said Alston.

"That's all right, anyway," pursued Rudgwick. "I daresay I'll be seeing him later. In the meantime you'll do, Fordyce. I like to open with the principal. Now, it's been a considerable long chase, but we've come in on the winning-post, and we'll be obliged to you for a chat with that charming ward of yours, whose society you have monopolised too long. At least that's my feeling, and I think it's Mr. Kerslake's."

"You will recognise, Wilson," said Alston im-

perturbably, "that I can't coerce any lady. If she likes to entertain you for an hour's chat, she's welcome."

"Then I reckon, we'll wait here until she comes," said Rudgwick bluntly.

"I'll make a point of finding out," said Alston rising, and he left the cabin.

"This is no good," said I to Rudgwick. "It will get us no farther."

"My son, we're in a law-abiding country, as you have several times reminded me," said Rudgwick dryly, "and we've got proprieties to observe. I may not handle a ship, but I know how to operate, and I'm going to carry through these negotiations, not you."

I made no remonstrance, for Alston returned just then.

"I regret," he said amiably, "that Miss Lovell is disinclined for society so early."

"Very well then; we'll come along a little later," declared Rudgwick.

Alston smiled in his face. I think he was quite confident of himself now.

"I can't honestly say she will be able to see anyone today," he remarked.

"Afternoon tea, Fordyce?" suggested Rudgwick.

"Miss Lovell's not up to the mark," replied Alston with a detached air of sympathy, "and I

guess she won't be taking afternoon tea to-day."

"That so?" Rudgwick scratched a hand thoughtfully, and his jaw thickened. "Well, I'm sorry the lady's indisposed, for she can't very well be left out of these considerations." He was tired of the preliminaries, as I could see. Alston was of a nature to parley for a long time, and to enjoy it. Rudgwick with his blunter ways broke out, "I don't care if you keep that girl or not, Fordyce, but we've got to see her right away."

The smile was still on Alston's face. "Really!" he said.

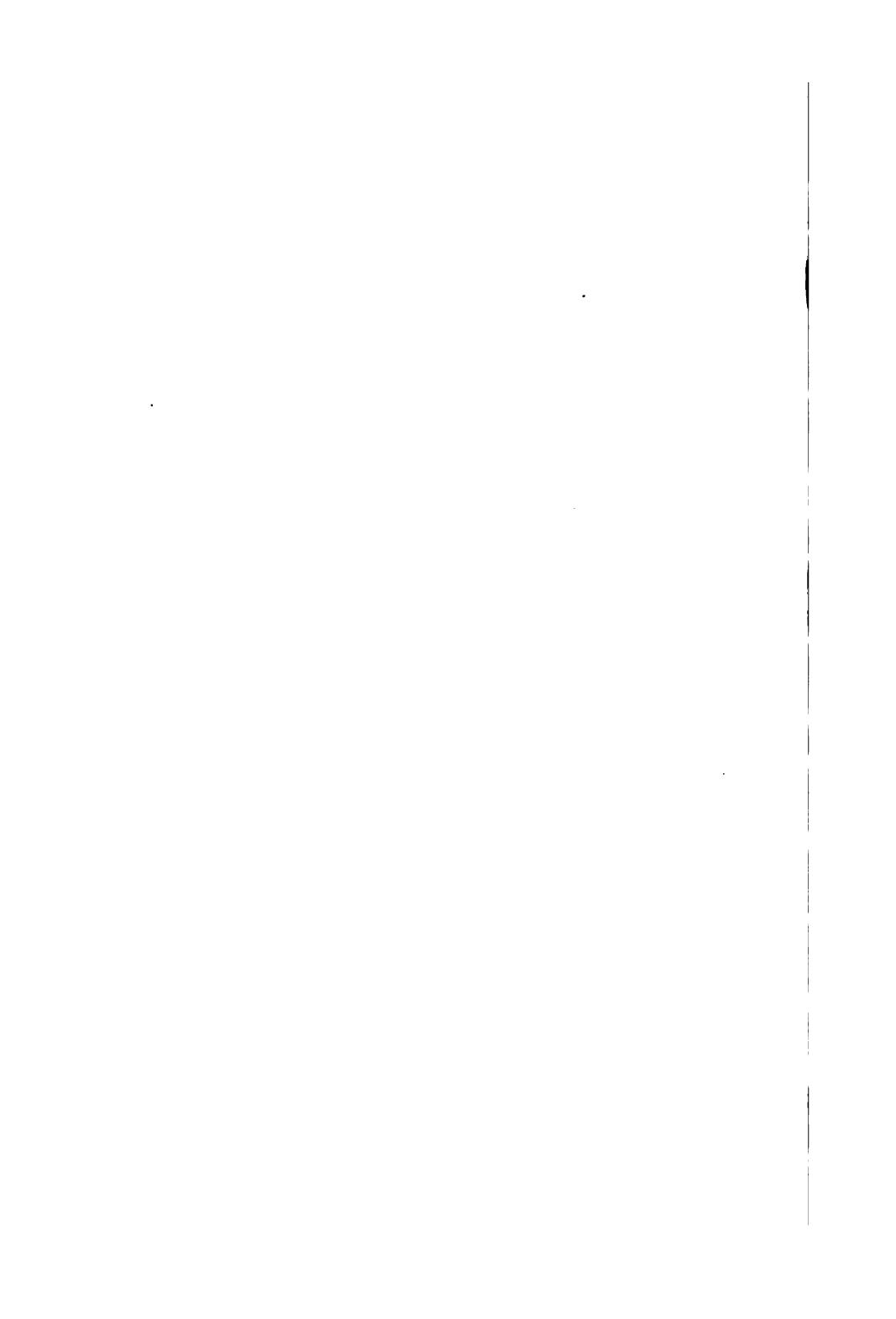
"You don't seem to understand the position," went on Rudgwick slowly. "You're calculating to marry this girl, and we're going to stop that. We don't think you a suitable match, anyway; and we're just going to tell the young lady so in the hope that she'll take our view as disinterested parties."

"I don't think she would," said Alston lightly. "Women have prejudices and prepossessions; and she's not likely to feel any great trust in gentlemen who have been persecuting her for days. Still I'm open to conviction, and you can try."

"I think that try will come off, Fordyce," said Rudgwick, gravely. "You think you've got the bulge on me because you're in possession. That tale about nine points of the law is damn



"I don't care if you keep that girl or not, Fordyce, but  
we've got to see her right away."



nonsense.' You ought to be smart enough to know that. The law ain't anything, anyway. See; I'll let you know plain. I'm going to use habeas corpus. You've got a young lady stowed away, and you're going to produce her, and I'll show you why. I needn't tell you my way, Fordyce. I guess you know I don't talk through my hat. Here's three affidavits that get you two ways, my son. In the first place you stole my yacht, and the lieutenant here and Butterfield depose to that. That fixes you here, my son. You know my ways, and what I can do on the end of a wire. I'll undertake to fix it all up in this tin-pot village yonder in an hour. That freezes you here, Fordyce. You can't get away. I guess you're waterlogged here."

Alston's smile was still a smile, and he glanced at us all three. "This is getting mighty interesting," he said. "Wilson Rudgwick standing by the law and invoking its aid."

"I'll invoke anything to get even," said Rudgwick bluffly, "You're fastened, boy. You're regularly nailed. If you make a bolt for it, we can run you down." He nodded outwards as if he would indicate the lugger. "We hold you."

Alston was no sailor, as I have said, and no doubt he was taken in by this piece of bluff. The smile for a moment lifted, and I wondered if it had been real.

"Well, say I'm anchored here. What's that amount to?"

"It won't work, Fordyce," said Rudgwick, shaking his head. "You're at bay, but you can't do anything. I guess a man may be dangerous when he's at bay, but we hold you too tight. Here's the next item in the menu. These affidavits witness that you have run away with a young lady and hold her captive against her will."

"Pardon me, Wilson, with her own consent—the lady whom I rescued from a rascal of a kidnapper, and who is to marry me."

"You may, if you like, demonstrate that," said the other. "I'm taking no interest in events so remote. All I want I get, and that is a little talk with the lady. That move with the affidavits gives me that. See? By God, Fordyce Alston, you played me false, and I'm going to squelch you, crack you like a flea," and Rudgwick, black and hard of face, thundered on the table with his fist.

"You make me tired, Wilson," said Alston, recovering his smile. "You're not first hero in a melodrama. Anyway, Miss Lovell's not well enough to receive visitors." He rose, and Rudgwick rose, all signs of his anger gone.

"Nice little crib of yours, Fordyce," he remarked. "I guess this runs you into something like 300 dollars a day, don't it?" He went out.

"If I was you, Fordyce," he threw over his shoulder, "I'd make certain of Jude. He's nasty, is Jude. I don't hand him over with testimonials."

The deck was clear still, for Jude had not dared to face the master whom he had betrayed. It was Alston who showed us over the side, and who watched us pull away in the morning sunlight. He waved a hand in farewell. I wondered if he were still as sure of himself and of his triumph.

Our game, as outlined forcibly by Rudgwick, seemed safe enough. The only danger lay in the inferior speed of the lugger in the prevailing wind, for it was possible, even probable, that Jude would undeceive Alston in regard to the practicability of being overtaken. There was our weak point, and it might prove fatal. But it did not disturb Rudgwick who was in good humour from his interview.

"If his crew had been mine I would have forced it through," he said. "But these fellows are no good for an affair of that sort. I've no use for them."

Certainly force was out of the question; the battle now was to diplomacy, and Rudgwick went ashore at once to start his operations. What he did I do not know, for I did not inquire what he intended, and the subsequent turn of events rendered it unnecessary. But he was a magnate in command of agents everywhere, and

able to say to this man "Go" and he would go, or to that "Come" and he would come. I concluded he set his machinery going. Both he and Alston were ignorant of English methods, and I suppose they imagined that a wealthy man could expedite the processes of the law, and possibly have a sheriff to seize the *Mermaid* in the course of a few hours.

Meanwhile I kept watch over the schooner, lest Alston should make another attempt to get away, such as almost had succeeded on the Cornish coast. It must have been half-way through the morning, when I despaired a little boat putting off from the yacht. It departed without ostentation, with an unobtrusive air which at once attracted my attention. At once I had the lugger's boat dropped, and was pulled ashore, landing immediately in the wake of the party. Alston hailed me, but nowhere was Miss Lovell visible. Two of Jude's ruffianly hands grinned familiarly at me, and I could not but feel that, were it not for the implication of Miss Lovell in the plot, Rudgwick was well served for employing such a gang. They had been used to do his dirty work; and now they were doing Alston's.

"Well met on the Rialto!" cried Alston cheerily. "We seem bound to knock up against each other. How's Wilson?"

Without waiting for an answer, he ascended

the shore and began to walk briskly towards the houses of the village. The sea rolled gently on the sands of that small indentation, and some cottages straggled down towards the flat of the shore. But farther away the village straggled upwards into the small valley at the back of which rose the bleak uplands of Exmoor. Alston walked in a business-like way to the chief inn, and after a brief visit continued his way to the post-office. Nearby he encountered Rudgwick, who had evidently come from what he called "the end of the wire." They exchanged salutations, Alston remarking on the warmth of the day, and Rudgwick on the slowness of English telegraph operators. He stood and watched Alston go towards the post-office.

"He's all right," he observed casually to me. "He's got something in his head; I can tell from the way he wags it. But if he wants to cable any, I've fixed him up a bit. I guess he won't get on to the other end inside some time. I've left that operator telegraphing the Book of Ecclesiastes for me. That's a good old wheeze."

He turned, nodded to me, and then paused. "You keeping an eye on him?" he inquired. "Right my son, I'll go bail for you. Well, he can't get away from the post-office yet awhile. Let's have a drink."

We went back to the inn, and entered the bar-

parlour, where the landlord attended us, a pleasant-faced, cheerful, smiling fellow with a rustic deliberation. He conceived there was some deep-laid humour in Rudgwick's remarks, and smiled increasingly and vaguely at them, but was in his sphere and his depth when it came to local inquiries.

It suited me to remain at the inn which commanded a view of the village street and the bay, particularly as Alston also chose it as his headquarters. Rudgwick strolled about the place, smoking cigars, extravagantly naval in appearance and rig. Butterfield had been left aboard. A Sabbatarian calm rested over the village, though as a matter of fact it was Saturday. Certainly no one would have dreamed that these two quiet and inoffensive American gentlemen were sworn enemies, and engaged in a desperate duel that might spell ruin to one at least. Alston read a local paper, as if it interested him, but I conceive that he was only waiting there to be convenient to the telegraph office. He was amiable as he always showed himself, talked a little to me, and occasionally at me, as if it were a joke which amused him, and yawned and consulted his watch, and finally invited me to lunch with him.

"It's a dreary business this hanging around," he said. "Wilson's right about these post-offices

of yours. Say, that was a neat idea of his, keeping the operator going. It was a bully idea. It's made a difference."

He came to a pause abruptly, as a messenger boy entered. He put out a hand and took the telegram, opened it and read.

"No answer," he said to the boy, and then looked across at me. "You can have a copy of this if you like Kerslake. Wilson might find it useful; save him trouble."

He handed it to me, and I read it. It was signed Lovell, and stated that Mr. Fordyce Alston was authorised by the signer to undertake the guardianship of her daughter and to bring her back to the Isle of Wight.

"That disposes of a good bit," said Alston, nodding at it when he saw I had finished. "That wipes some of Wilson out." He folded the paper, put it in his pocket, and strolled out carelessly. I followed. It was necessary to keep in touch with so bright a gentleman as this. He walked up the village towards the church, and leaned over the stone wall and contemplated it.

"Say, Kerslake," he called without looking round. "What's the matter with being my best man, eh?"

He walked up to the porch and studied the notices on the door; then he turned off towards the vicarage, which was entered from the church-

yard. He disappeared within the gates, and I waited outside.

A quarter of an hour elapsed before he returned, when he approached me jauntily.

"This job don't really suit you, Kerslake. You're not a born spy. You were cut out for higher work; take my word for it. Still, it don't flutter me much; so come along and have lunch."

That invitation, of course, I declined; I ate with Butterfield, who had landed to bring news of the schooner. She was lying leisurely at anchor, but some boats had gone off to her, and Butterfield was of opinion that she was being provisioned.

"Never mind, we can't help that," I told him. "As long as we've got the man under our hands we're all right."

Butterfield, who was excited and ill at ease, was anxious to get back, and left me with all despatch, but he did not succeed in returning as he expected, for he met Rudwick, as you shall hear, who sent him on an errand. Alston left the inn about three, and set out up the valley, as if to explore it after the fashion of an ordinary tourist. I made after him. He recognised my duty which was that of sentinel, a watch-dog. There was no need of pretence or concealment.

Butterfield hove into view as I got to the corner of the street, and I waited for him. It

was then I learned that Rudgwick had prevented his return to the lugger, and I told him my news. As we spoke together Rudgwick came up the street, and we three conferred in the heart of the little village. Rudgwick had of course, by this time heard my news about the telegram.

"That leaves the other part of my scheme more urgent," said he. "Blamed if these fools can be hurried up."

"Well, we've got him safe for the present," I said. "I don't know why he hangs about here, instead of making a dash for it."

Rudgwick looked up the valley, where Alston's tall figure was visible mounting the road.

"Your leg well enough for that game?" he asked; and I told him it was good enough to walk down Alston even if he were to give me a lead across Exmoor. I was always an admirable walker, and I hardly felt any inconvenience from the wound, save a little soreness.

Rudgwick pondered in his brooding way. "Guess, you know Alston doesn't wear kid gloves?" he said. "Best take Butterfield."

"Oh, I'm not a fool," I answered. "I'm armed, but if you'll spare Butterfield I'll take him along." He nodded. "Look here, Butterfield," I said. "I'll keep him in sight, and no more, and I want you just to keep me in sight, and no more. Do you see? Make believe you're spy on me. It

may come in useful, that he should think I'm the only one."

Rudgwick nodded again. "That's a great scheme. Butterfield you mark that, and get a move on you."

Thus it came about that we went up the valley, in a queue, Alston leading by a good stretch, myself in the middle and Butterfield bringing up the rear. The way our leader took us lay along a hillside, and soon began to climb out of the inhabited regions of the valley. The heights grew barren and wilder, and the prospect of the sea widened below us. From time to time Alston paused and looked around, as if he were admiring the scenery. But I knew he knew I was behind him, and it may have been that he wanted to be sure of my whereabouts. He had probably sighted me at times, but of that I could not be sure. Presently, after one of his pauses he left the road and began to go down the rough hillside towards the bottom of the valley. In this direction there was arable land, green with corn, and watered by a little stream that flowed through it to the sea.

I turned off the road before I reached the spot at which he had digressed, and so, with little attempt now to hide myself, made down towards the meadows and the cornlands. When I had reached the bottom I looked back, but Butterfield, who

had been carefully following my instructions, was not in sight. I continued, and traced Alston to the stream. This he followed upwards again, seemingly without purpose, until he had mounted a rise at the head of the valley and was once more at a considerable elevation above the sea. Here off a lane with low hedges a windmill reared itself. Alston entered the mill.

It stood silent, its arms motionless, in arrest, though a brisk wind was blowing on the hill. I remember remarking that, and rejoicing to think that the lugger would now not be at such a disadvantage compared with the schooner. Alston did not reappear. A little way off was a cottage, but if the mill was still in use it had ceased work on this Saturday afternoon. I wondered what had brought Alston here, and concluded it might even be mere deviltry, to make sport of me. But that was hardly in keeping with his character, which was that of a man who takes the shortest cut to his end. I waited some time and then I approached the windmill, for it had occurred to me that there might be a backway out, and a jumble of sheds behind might have concealed Alston's retreat from it. I peered in through the door which was reached by a flight of steps, but could make out nothing; and so I mounted slowly.

It may be that my very deliberation was my

undoing, and that if I had taken the intervening space at a run I should have escaped. The plain fact is that ere I had reached the topmost rung of the ladder I was suddenly conscious of a creaking and then I was knocked senseless.

I came to, with a dizzy head, that ached beyond bearing, and Alston was stooping over me. Only vaguely conscious, I was aware that my limbs were cramped and that I could not stir.

"It was a pretty hard hit," remarked Alston in a professional way.

"What—what was it?" I asked stupidly.

"Well, you see you were foolish enough to get in the way of the sails," he said. "And so I've brought you in to recover from the nasty knock you got."

He opened the door as he spoke, nodded and left me, closing it behind him. My heart sank. He had worsted me again. Like a fool, and as if I had had no experience of the man, I had walked into his trap as mild as a lamb. He had released the windsails when he saw me mounting, and they had done his work for him effectually. I wondered dully why they had not knocked me clean out of life altogether.

But sensation flowed back on me slowly, and I grew alive to the full environment of my position; and immediately on that followed the memory of Butterfield. How fortunate it was

that I had arranged for him to dog my steps! Aching and sore as I was, there was still consolation in the thought that my release was but the affair of a few minutes. And then I realised how I was confined. I was muffled to the neck in an empty bag, which was tied securely about me there and held me helpless. However, I was not going to struggle, to kick futilely against the pricks. I would await Butterfield's arrival with what patience I might, and turn over the situation afresh in my mind.

It was clear that Alston had deliberately entrapped me, and in consequence he must have a strong reason for wishing to throw me off his track.

Yet even rid of me he would have two others, as implacable as I, to hunt him down, unless he intended to isolate us and destroy our force in detail. I puzzled my head, as I lay in that undignified heap on the floor of the mill, as to what the arch-enemy would be doing now. Had he gone back to the schooner to bring Miss Lovell ashore? Or was he plotting to dispose of Rudgwick as he had disposed of me?

In the midst of these reflections there came a noise, and I recognised the sound of feet grating on the ladder. A little after, Butterfield's face appeared.

"By gosh!" he ejaculated. "He's done you fair, he's fair done you."

He stooped over me with a certain solicitous kindness which was native to him, and examined me. "He's a hell of a fellow, is Alston," he observed. "He's a real hell of a fellow."

His deft fingers were plying about the cord which bound the neck of the sack all the time.

"He's almost been too much for me," I said, "and I've the most infernal backache."

"Almost," said Butterfield contemptuously. "I guess you ain't a proper match for Fordyce Alston. It takes the three of us. Not that the boss couldn't manage himself, but he don't want unnecessary trouble, and so he stays more or less home and directs. Yes, I guess it takes all three of us."

"I'm glad to hear it," said Alston's voice coolly.

Butterfield turned sharply, and then made a dive, but the man who darkened the doorway stooped and caught him as one catches a struggling child, and turning him over put a knee in the small of his back.

"Don't wriggle any, for it might crack," said he. "And I don't want to use more force than is necessary. I guessed the lieutenant here might have a confederate, and I'm damned if it was a bad idea."

"All right," gasped Butterfield, giving up. "Let be. I don't want to eat dirt more'n I can help."

Alston turned him round deftly and groped at a pile of empty sacks nearby. He had made use of this for me, and I was squirming and struggling in the mesh of my prison helplessly and vainly.

"I don't know but I ought to put you in wrong way up, my son," said Alston humourously. "But right way will do anyway," and the mouth of the sack yawned before the intended victim. Butterfield renewed his efforts, kicking his feet wide, but they were encased swiftly in a grip that was a vice, and the sack reached his middle. Then he almost vanished in it from his littleness. Alston laughingly tied it about his neck.

"Calls to mind," said he, "a kind of fairy tale I used to read. I don't right recollect it, but it was this sort of thing."

"Spotted me?" inquired Butterfield ceasing to struggle.

"Spotted you, Nathaniel, quite a long way off, and laid for you, like Brer Fox."

"You're pretty smart," admitted the little man with a sigh.

Alston nodded. He had no time to waste in conversations, compliments or ceremonies. We heard his feet rattle down the ladder.

"This is up against me," said Butterfield. "I'd knock my head if I could, but I can't. He paused. "Guess the boss will do it for me," he added pensively.

## CHAPTER XXII

### THE LAST CHASE

TEN minutes passed ere Butterfield gave up his attempts to disengage himself; but the sack was a secure prison, and resisted all assaults on it. It gave with every movement of the limbs and met attack by retiring. Alston had removed Butterfield's knife from him, and I found he had done the same by me; so that though our hands were free we had nothing but bare fingers with which to cut through the coarse texture of the sacking. With foot and nail we fought, and gave up out of sheer weariness, in order to gain strength to renew the combat later.

"I got a bit of pencil which I'm figuring to work on directly," said Butterfield, "and seems to me there's a bit of a hole my heel has made. We'll have another go directly. Gosh, I'm fair smoothed with flour."

For the unfortunate little man had been encased in an old sack, and his exertions had raised the dust of the flour of ages from the web of it. He breathed wearily and with difficulty.

"Blamed, if I don't think I'd sooner roll myself to the door and down the steps, if it was open."

It was open; for at that moment it opened, and in the half light I recognized the new-comer. It was Rudgwick.

"This about finds your limit, Nathaniel," he remarked, and stooping with a knife cut the cords that confined both of us. Then he stood up, a sardonic smile on his face. "Get a move on you, now. There's no time to waste, boys. Fordyce has got on his seven-league boots."

With difficulty I got to my feet, having extricated myself from the bag, and I was amazingly sore and stiff. Rudgwick noted it.

"You get most of the kicks, Kerslake," he said. "You're not a lucky man."

"I am this minute," I answered, "for I'd given up hope of freedom for some hours. How on earth do you come here?"

"Why, your plan wasn't a bad one; it showed real statesmanship; but it didn't go far enough. There was the making of a good idea there. So I made it."

"How?" I inquired, not understanding.

"I followed Butterfield. I was the fourth wheel. Fordyce knew you, and suspected a second, but he wasn't fly enough to look for a third."

"Oh, the boss's all right," said Butterfield admiringly.

"Well, get along now," urged Rudgwick. "For-dyce is racing for the sea. I was in two minds to follow him, but I guess this was your privilege," and those words and that act of rescue coupled with that renunciation were, and remain, the best I knew of that remarkable man. He had run the risk of losing that game to give us our chance.

The one satisfactory point was that Alston did not know that Rudgwick was not on guard, either aboard the lugger or in the village. What then was his object in hurrying back? We could not answer that question without hurrying back ourselves; and this we did, as fast as my enfeebled state would allow us. Butterfield went on before to make inquiries, and he had succeeded in learning one point ere Rudgwick and I joined him. Alston had returned to the inn half an hour earlier, and had then gone on to the vicarage. He had seemed in great haste, and had given his orders sharply. To that the affable but muddle-headed inn-keeper could add nothing. He did not know if Alston had gone aboard the schooner, which lay in the offing, as impassive and idle as ever, with no sign of life, only the American flag crackling in the freshening breeze. Inquiries in the village failed to produce any definite answer; but on the sands we learned more, namely that Alston had

put off to the yacht and must now be aboard. This news was brought by Butterfield, and Rudgwick immediately hailed a boat and started for the lugger, in his factotum's company, leaving me to follow forthwith. There was just one reason why I did not go with them. If Alston had gone aboard to bring Miss Lovell ashore it was well that one of us should be there to meet him, when he landed. But I had another thought also. Alston had visited the vicarage twice. Perhaps there some light might be shed upon his movements if I went in the guise of a friend.

It was at the vicarage I got my surprise. The vicar was out, and, to my pressing inquiries on the plea of urgency, came the remarkable statement that he had left with a tall gentleman from the yacht. Back I rushed in new excitement to the shore, and discovered that Alston had had for companion in the boat the parson, "a little fat man," as an eye-witness volunteered. I did not hesitate now a moment as to my course, but was speedily being rowed for the lugger with my startling news.

Half-way out I saw the schooner shaking out her sails, and I urged my boatman to redouble his exertions; but the crew were deft and knew their work, and by the time I reached the lugger the *Mermaid* was under way. I knew it all now; I guessed at the last crafty plan of that crafty and

elusive brain. As he found it impossible to marry ashore, he would marry afloat; and by persuasion, no doubt, by the graces and arts of his address, or by other means maybe, he had won over the parson of the village to his ends. After all it was a permissible and harmless whim for an American millionaire to be married on his yacht by special license.

The lugger was in a state of confusion when I boarded her, for Rudgwick was furious at the prospect of being defeated at last and was showing his rough temper.

"He must have found I was ashore somehow," he said, "and thinks to catch me napping. No, by God, he don't, if we run across the Atlantic for it."

It was then that I told him my surmise, which amounted to certainty, and he listened with an ominous frown.

"See here," he declared. "You've got to get every pound out of this boat. That's your affair. I guess you're no good ashore with that game leg and stuff. Push her along."

There was no need for his stimulus: my incentive was elsewhere. My small crew answered gravely to my call and we had the boat moving as the schooner with her swelling spread of canvas turned the promontory. She was running out for the Atlantic, and the wind was thrashing from

the northwest. We followed half a mile in her rear.

But it was soon apparent that we were no match for the runaway. The lugger spread a lot of canvas, and made a good showing before the wind, but the yacht outsailed her, and we fell slowly astern. Fortunately Rudgwick had not built his schooner for speed, but for comfort in the first place, and so she was not very light of foot. The point was, however, that she was too light for us. The rest of the afternoon we struggled pluckily on, the gloom settling upon us all. Rudgwick's face relapsed into a marmoreal frown; he smoked and walked about and growled out a few exchanges from time to time. Seeing this depression Butterfield, if you please, came to the rescue. The wind was stiffening behind, and the sea was high, and he had turned a ghastly colour; but, sensitive in mind and body as I knew him to be to these coincidental evils, he played the part of comforter gallantly.

"If she goes like this," said he, clinging in a sickly way to the mast, "we'll soon be there, anyway."

"Where?" demanded Rudgwick with a monosyllabic sarcasm.

"Oh, we'll be on top of them," said the little man with cheerful fortitude.

Rudgwick snorted, and deigned no answer.

This was he at his worst, in an intelligible, but an unjust mood, the mood of a man who is accustomed to get his own way, and who has no consideration for his inferiors. I knew he could be a bully, and I saw it now in him. He was openly rude and contemptuous to his creature and very bluff with me.

"Can't this blamed Noah's ark make another foot, anyway?" he demanded angrily.

"No," said I as shortly as he, "unless maybe we were to pitch a Jonah overboard."

He gave me a look, and then his face relaxed slightly.

"We'd have to decide who is our Jonah. I've a notion myself."

"So have I." We grinned at each other, and he went off in a little better mood to rest in the afterpart.

We had lost sight of the schooner for some time ere dusk fell, and that seemed to be the signal for an increase in the wind. It was blowing a gale out of the north, and the sky was savage with wrack, and ominous to a sailor. The water ran higher every minute, and the lugger shipped seas constantly. But she was stoutly built and shouldered her way roughly and imperturbably southwards.

"We're going to have a dirty night," Rudgwick remarked. Butterfield by this time was prostrate below.

"Yes," said I, "and I must keep her out. We can't chance a lee shore in this gale."

"Alston will have to keep out too?" said he inquiringly. I nodded. "Well, it don't matter where he goes now," said Rudgwick moodily. "He can fix up all right."

This touched me on the raw. "Can he?" I said sharply. "You forget apparently that the *Mermaid* sails under the American flag, and in that case I don't believe a marriage would be legal."

"I guess Fordyce would run up a Union Jack," said he dryly.

"That would make no difference," I declared.

"It would persuade the parson," he replied in the same tone, "and as for the legality of the marriage, I guess the girl will think so, and that's all that matters."

Our eyes met, and I knew what he meant. My blood was hot within me. Could nothing save her? In that moment I was like one possessed of a devil; I was in a bitter black mood, and I had the lugger put a point nearer the coast.

Proximity to that rugged shore became dangerous on such a night. The gale rising to a hurricane shrieked in the sheets, and roared upon the canvas making all Heaven a pandemonium of sound; and the big water rolled and heaved threateningly as we climbed it. The light kept coming and going; for the clouds in the sky, broken into flinders by the

gale, were but rags that drove in a panic across the face of the full moon, and alternated light and twilight. It was in one of the flashes of light that I sighted the schooner. She was hull down, on our port, and it was the rake of her masts that I recognized. I laid the lugger a little nearer, as near as I dared, and called Rudwick. His voice shouted out of the contending elements, and when he reached me, blown and clinging to the lugger's side, I pointed out the *Mermaid*.

His shout was almost inaudible, but I caught the sense of it.

"What the hell is she doing?"

The continuing moon gave us the secret. She was in some trouble, for her bows came round towards us as we gazed, and she lurched and tumbled.

"Something's wrong with the rudder," I shouted. "This looks serious. We must get closer. She'll never live in this sea with her steering gear wrong."

My heart was a nest of fears, though I said little. I took the wheel myself and in spite of the protestation of the skipper, laid the lugger direct for the helpless schooner. But our light did not serve us long; the sea was soon merged in profound darkness, and a black pall covered the sky. Simultaneously rain began to drive, as cold as ice, across the summer night. The lugger laboured on, as clumsy and as steady as an old cart-horse. But we were galloping blindly, now, and, had it not been

that all my terror was for Sylvia Lovell, I should have felt anxiety for ourselves.

It was not until out of the blackness that surrounded us a thin, small light suddenly emerged, that I discovered we were upon the schooner; and instantaneously I altered our course. But the heavy sea washed over the deck and buffeted us, and the lugger groaned at the blow. I could not say to this day exactly how it occurred, but it was due to the crippled condition of the schooner. She must have swung around. At any rate we fouled her suddenly with a dull crash that was unheard amid the tumult of the water, but which was palpable to every other sense.

For some moments we rode together as it were in an awful jumble, grinding bulwarks to match-board; and overhead the moon gleamed forth again, revealing to me Alston's figure, clutching the deck-house. Rudwick clung beside me, making no movement or sound, and it was at this moment that little Butterfield made his appearance from below. He was sicklied o'er with pallor, but a great light shone on his face to my eyes; though it may have been the moon that touched him with its unearthliness. He stretched an arm towards Alston and shouted, and climbed on the bulwarks. Simultaneously I had been seized with a resolution. Sylvia Lovell should not go down with the wreck to a merciless grave.

I would make an effort to set her on board the lugger, where at least we had a chance for our lives, unless we had suffered too severely by the collision.

I leaped over the side and down to the schooner's deck, and Butterfield stood preparing to follow. At that moment, in the full blaze of the moon I saw Alston release one hand and put it to his breast. A spurt of fire streamed from him, but no report was audible. There was a whirr in my face, and I started. Butterfield fell heavily back on the lugger.

I ran across the slanting deck of the schooner to the cabin. I had no thought of Alston, only of Sylvia; and I forced open the door, but found no one. Then it struck me that in such a sea Miss Lovell would have been removed from the deck cabins to the saloon below; and I made my way to the companion ladder. The schooner pitched violently, and I was conscious of several men who were gathered on the deck, and of Jude shouting and gesticulating. Vague indeterminate impressions floated in my brain, but I had no general sense of the whole scene; it was just a nightmare, disturbed and terrifying.

But I forgot that in that moment of bewildered ecstasy when I descended, and in the centre of the saloon Sylvia Lovell was faintly visible in

the moonlight. She ran into my arms with a cry that I hoped was a cry of joy. Hastily pulling her with me up the staircase, I cast my eyes towards the lugger, and now beheld with dismay that she was separated from us by a dozen paces of tumultuous water. It was impossible to get back. My fortunes now were the fortunes of that doomed schooner.

I tore myself away from Sylvia and stumbled over the deck to find Jude. He had kept his head, and his bull voice roared his orders. The rudder had jammed, and the schooner was helpless. He thundered across the seas at the lugger which could not hear, and then after a time turned to me.

"I guess, we've got to stand the racket," he shouted.

Back I went to the saloon, not seeing any sign of Alston on my way; but by this time the light was bad again. We were adrift in a wild sea, and we knew not how near or far were the iron cliffs that had been cruel stepmother to so many tall and gallant ships. There was nothing to be done save to keep up our hearts and be patient. If the *Mermaid* were doomed we could not save her; but it might be that she would tumble about the sea till the morning, or till the gale blew itself out.

I found Sylvia awaiting me anxiously. She

was worn and white and troubled with all the misery she had undergone. I put my arms about her and so drew her into that harbour of love. "I love you, I love you, darling," I cried in her ear, and she clutched me tightly, answering nothing. Yet that clutch was an answer. I soothed her fears, and encouraged her. I made her sit down, as well as she could in a ship that was forever tossing like a cork. I seized her hand, and examined and felt it.

"No ring!" I cried exultingly. "You are not married!"

"No," she breathed deeply back, her face against mine. "I would not—I would not. He was angry, but I would not—I would not. I would not ever since—" she broke off, and shuddered, and clung closer to me.

After a time as we sat there I judged from the motion that the wind was abating; but it was still dark, and as there were no lights on the schooner it was impossible to say definitely what was happening. But I seemed to hear better now amid the uproar, and the drub of the sea was not so deafening. Then it was that I heard my name in a shout, and looking up saw Alston dimly at the bottom of the companion ladder.

"Kerslake! Kerslake! Come out like a man!" he called. He could not discern us in the gloom, and he came forward a step or two.

"Sylvia! Sylvia!" he called. "Sylvia, girl!"

But we were silent. The man was desperate now. He had blood on his hands, and his enterprise had failed. He was a ruined man, and he knew it. Here he was broken out in his true evil light, a desperado, a reckless man, a gambler with life and death.

"Sylvia! Sylvia!" he called, and silence answered; or rather the bellowing of the wind and the roar of the waves that was that silence.

"Kerslake, you're a man, ain't you?" he sneered. "Come out and show yourself."

Sylvia clung to me, as if she would hold me back. We were like two children, crouching in the dark, and silent lest we should be discovered. A tiny pop of sound broke through the droning of the gale. He laughed, and fired again. At bay with Fate he made a good loser. He came down the saloon, and paused before us, surveying us with what feeling in his heart or eyes I could not tell. I put Sylvia's trembling arms away from me and stood up.

"You called. What do you want?" I asked.

"Damned if I don't believe you're grit, Kerslake," he shouted. "Anyway you're going to be tested. I guess you've done me out of this, more than Wilson. Where's Wilson in this, anyway? He don't get what he wants. We're all booked, Lieutenant."

"That's not proved," I said.

"Anyway, I'm booked, and I figure out you are too. Sylvia, girl, you go away. Go right into one of those cabins there, with the fat parson for company."

She rose and swiftly clung to me. "No; no; no; you must not, you cannot! Oh, you shall not!"

"Get along, girl, and no fuss," said he abruptly. "Kerslake, you're pretty tough, and you wriggled out of two holes. This, you bet, is the third and last and biggest."

He levelled his revolver, and Sylvia dashed between us in the twilight. He dropped his hand.

"You'd never have done that for me, Sylvia, girl," he remarked quite coolly. "The game's up. Say, is that a noise up aloft?" He listened, and we all listened. Then he put his weapon in his pocket and went towards the companion ladder, clinging to the rail as he mounted. I held Sylvia close to my heart a moment and then followed.

It must have been midnight now, and the loom of the land was on our port, to which we were slowly drifting. The wind had undoubtedly gone down, but the sea was as heavy as ever, and we bobbed upon it like a piece of wood. The men were engaged in firing rockets, which flared out in the night, and disclosed the formidable cliffs which we were approaching. There was not a rag of canvas on the schooner, which was merely

spindrift in the ocean. Huge seas broke over her and battered her; and in the course of this persistent assault some of the hands had gone overboard. But Jude stuck steadily to his post, a figure not ignoble, short, bluff, and snub of nose, but a man and a master. The rockets screamed and flared and faded in the darkness.

And now we were conscious of a light abeam and knew there was still hope. Voices hailed us out of the night, and the flare of a succeeding rocket showed us an approaching life-boat.

"We've stood the racket, by God," said Jude with gleaming eyes.

But Alston who was nearby, said nothing. His eyes were on the life-boat.

I went back to the saloon and prepared Sylvia for the rescue; and when we got on deck again it was crowded with hands, and a rope was being made fast. By means of this she first of all passed over a cradle into safety; and, one by one, the work of rescue was carried on. The sea was now breaking persistently over the schooner, and amidships she was continuously awash. One man jumping from the forecastle into the waist, in order to reach the after-deck where the life-boat was at work, was caught in the flood and swept away forever. Alston had now vanished; and when I myself reached the life-boat I looked to see if he was there; but in the confusion I could

not discover. Jude came across last of all, and the rest of the crew had perished in the ravening sea.

As the life-boat put off, the moon broke out again on a wild welter of water, and disclosed the cliffs a hundred yards away. The nose of the schooner was set towards these as though she were bent on her own destruction, and this was her goal. A cry arose from someone in the boat, and we could see now a tall figure, plainly visible in the prow, under the moonlight.

"Alston!" I called out.

But my voice couldn't reach him. He stood contemplating, as it seemed, the cliffs on which the schooner was now rapidly drifting. It did not take many minutes. She went ashore softly, quietly, inaudibly, just as if she slipped on the rocks, and crumpled up and went under. And then I saw nothing but the moon on the tumbling white water.

The life-boat made its way with difficulty and in bitter cold to St. Ives from which station she had started. Sylvia Lovell lay in my arms with my coat about her to keep her warm, just as she had lain (so long ago it seemed!) on that first night on the Breton moor. She was silent and I knew not what thoughts ran in her head. Mine were strangely mingled, and a sense of the tragic blended with that wonderful romantic thrill

which her presence stirred in me. When we landed we were taken to one of the hotels, and hospitably treated. And here we were surprised by Rudgwick, who, after making inquiries as to our whereabouts, entered the room where we were resting.

"Glad to see you out of it, Kerslake," he said in his matter-of-fact voice. "Glad to see Miss Lovell too. Near shave? Where's Fordyce?"

"All that came ashore are in the hotel," I replied.

He was silent a moment, and then, "Drowned?" bluntly.

"He went ashore with the schooner. He could have come off," I explained wearily.

"Say, Miss Lovell would be the better of a brandy and soda," he suggested watching her; but she broke down at that last straw.

"Oh, I want to go home!" she cried hysterically; and then, throwing her arms about me: "I want you to come. Oh, I want you to come!"

Rudgwick himself poured out the brandy, and I made her take a little. He contemplated her, and his face went into a frown.

"I did the best I could in regard to you," he said presently in a drawling voice. "I made your man go as fast as he could for St. Ives; and he didn't want much asking. And we let the authorities know your position. But I confess I hadn't

many hopes. I thought I'd seen the last of you, Kerslake." He paused.

"You fixed that up all right?" he asked, with eyes speculative on Sylvia.

"Yes," I said.

"Bully!" he replied. "By the Lord I'd given you up, but you win on the post." He helped himself to brandy. "Well, young lady, you'll succeed in straightening out your kinks, thanks to the lieutenant here; and I hope you bear no animosity, and we'll be friends."

Sylvia's large eyes wondered. "She knows nothing yet," I said.

"Guess you'll have a pickle of explanations," he said dryly.

"She shall learn in time," I said.

Sylvia held my hand and pressed it convulsively. She trusted me; that was enough. Rudgwick went to the window and looked out on the water where the dawn was showing. It came with a falling wind and a plunging grey sea.

"I have loved you since first I saw you," I whispered to her. She pressed my hand.

"I—I think I loved you—when we were in the swamp, but I didn't know it. I—only felt something strange." That was her return whisper.

Rudgwick came back.

"I guess Fordyce was a good sport. I liked a scrap with him. But it was time he cleared his

account," he said thoughtfully. "That readiness with his pistol comes of Montana and wouldn't work hereabouts." He paused. "I'm sorry about Nathaniel. I've only got this damned Jude left. Didn't Butterfield say he had a child somewhere, girl or boy? I forget—anyway, I'll make it square. Yes, it was time Fordyce went. He was always in too much of a hurry."

He stopped, and his eyes twinkled slightly as he looked at me.

"I guess, Kerslake, I'll have that voting majority all right all the same."

I said nothing, for I had all that I wanted; I had Sylvia.

THE END











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